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Half a Dozen Daughters.

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BY

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Author of "A Fatal Error," etc.

90116

Life is a tangled skeyne,
For patiente time to smothe."
Old M.S.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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CHAPTER I.

HALF A DOZEN DAUGHTERS.

THE ordinary reader starts aghast at this heading, and straightway in his heart rises pity for the unfortunate parents who own six daughters; but both Mr. and Mrs. Francis Shrugg needed no pity at the time this story commences. The father felt not one atom of regret that none but females called him parent; and the mother had not a particle of shame for having added six more to the already teeming female population. But Mr. and Mrs. Francis Shrugg were not a worldly-minded couple, neither were they *not* beset with cares as to how these girls were to be

mated, or otherwise provided for. The comfortable present in their cheerful home in Sussex Gardens was enough for them; let the future come, they could trust to it being as happy as the past.

Time after time, when the doctor's soft and commiserating announcement had been made to the expectant father, "*Another* daughter, my dear sir;" Mr. Shrugg had for the moment caught the commiseration in the doctor's tone, and shaken his head sadly as if it really was disappointing; and once when the announcement had been slightly varied with, "*Twin* daughters, my dear sir," he had even spoken testily.

"Twins! what *two* more?" he had cried, starting up from the chemical studies on which he spent the greater part of his days. "God bless me; what are we to do with them all?" But when he went upstairs and saw the comical distress of his wife's pretty face, as the two little pink babies were brought for her in-

spection; and as he heard the nurse's laments and plans as to how two were to be dressed in one set of clothes, his momentary vexation vanished then and there for ever; and he ended in calling the unconscious intruders a double blessing; and made himself quite merry by nicknaming them Ditto and Do.

After that there were two more announcements in due time, always the same. "Another daughter, my dear sir!" But there was no longer the shadow of a sting for him in the news. "Only one!" he would say. And he was really thankful; for after the arrival of twins, he had declared himself prepared to hear of being in a position even to receive the Queen's bounty, and quite dreaded to have his presentiments realized.

I think any man might be proud of six such daughters; not only because they were all pretty, some of them more than pretty,—beautiful, as we shall hear their lovers swear by-and-by; but also because they were all healthy in

mind and body: and I maintain that of all the blessings given us on earth, a healthy body is the greatest; and the beauty that springs from health is, notwithstanding the morbid romance that sees beauty only in the pallor of disease, the only true beauty. A pretty delicate woman is a fragile toy one fears even as one admires; but bright eyes and rounded limbs delight without reservation; and the eyes that flashed upon Mr. Shrugg, six pairs of eyes varied in form and colour, but all unvaried in health and clearness, gladdened him unfeignedly. They were good girls—as girls go—petulant sometimes, silly sometimes; inconsistent very often, thoughtlessly extravagant occasionally; but insolent and deaf to reason never; high spirited, more or less according to their different dispositions; of course they were saucy too, on occasion, and sarcastic about pretentious acquaintances. Were they not young women; and have I not said they were healthy? For the rest, they were pretty well educated, tolerable theologians,

affectionate sisters and daughters, kind to their servants, seldom squabbled amongst themselves, and were emphatically wholesome in mind and person; and for myself, though this may sound a too homely term to apply to young lady heroines, I would rather be able to apply it to my wife or sister than the loftier one of "lovely" or "intellectual." Comfort and happiness go with the one, and what does comfort not represent in daily family intercourse?

Mr. and Mrs. Shrugg were not rich as the world stands now-a-days; theirs was a love match; Mrs. Shrugg was a penniless bride, and Mr. Shrugg had no more than his mother's portion of £20,000. He had been brought up by his grandfather, old Robert Shrugg, of Shrugg, in Yorkshire; an old squire, with a fine estate, worth some £6000 or £7000 a year, to consider himself his heir, but his marriage had angered old Shrugg past redemption. Francis might be a "good lad;" nay, had always been a dutiful lad; and moreover, he was the orphan

child of that dearly-loved eldest boy, whose death happening in the hunting-field in the first year of his marriage, had aged the squire more than ten years of ordinary life could have done, and had seemed to give the posthumous baby a stronger claim upon his love. But his obstinate defiance, when his grandfather commanded him to think no more of pretty Susan Greville, and to marry a high-cheeked Yorkshire lady, whose charms were like Miss Kilmansegge's, thoroughly estranged the old man's affection; and henceforth the grandfather and grandson were as strangers to each other.

Francis Shrugg's vacant place at Shrugg was filled by a younger son, whose marriage had been to his grandfather's satisfaction, and whose children were born under the old roof (for the new favourite was said to know how to humour the old man); and though the marriage had become an unhappy one, and shame had tarnished the hitherto unsullied name through young Mrs. Robert Shrugg's conduct, the old

man clung to his latest choice to the very last, and left all he possessed to Robert Shrugg the younger, and after him to *his* son Robin, only mentioning Francis in his will, insultingly, as follows:

"And to my grandson, Francis Shrugg, whose mind is above worldly riches, as proved by his meditated disregard of all my wishes: I give and bequeath only the small tenement in Clack High Street, formerly the dower house to Shrugg Hall, now in the possession of Jeremiah Clacker, chemist; the latter to continue to inhabit it rent-free, till his decease, on the condition that he, the said Jeremiah Clacker, keeps the house and premises in good and habitable repair." And Mr. and Mrs. Francis Shrugg had, after the first moment's annoyance, laughed at the notion of owning a chemist's shop, in a place with such a name as Clack; and long before this story begins, were quite reconciled to know themselves disinherited, and to regard their wealthier cousins with equanimity.

"I would not change places with poor Robert," Francis had said, kindly and compassionately; "but I think he would with me."

Which was true enough: for Robert Shrugg, notwithstanding his large possessions, was a homeless man; his wife chose to live on his estate, therefore the Hall was closed to him; his daughter was married; his son serving in the army abroad; with wife and children, he yet was a widower and childless. Naturally an affectionate man, position and wealth could not compensate him for the lack of family ties. He grew yearly more taciturn and dissatisfied, and at last was actually unable to witness his cousin's family happiness, and now had entirely ceased to visit at his house.

Mr. Francis Shrugg's chemical tastes have been alluded to; he inherited them from his grandfather, who had carried them so far as to have studied under a famous chemist of his day, as if the getting of his daily bread depended on his progress. The old squire had

in his youth blown up a room at the Hall during one of his wonderful tests on combustible liquids; and it was because of his wife's terror lest he should some day blow up herself and children, that he converted a room in the old dower house in the adjacent little town into a laboratory, and allowed his factotum, Jeremiah Clacker, to open the front parlour as a chemist's shop, reserving to himself the right to use the still and chemicals how and when he pleased.

Jeremiah Clacker had first come into favourable notice when young Francis Shrugg met with his fatal accident. He it was who had staunched the gaping wound on the temple, and on whose arm the poor young man's head rested during his last drive home; this kindly service, so kindly rendered, the squire never forgot, and the discovery of abilities directed to his own pet pursuit was a further bond between them. From being a mere assistant in a third-rate apothecary's shop, Jeremiah thus became

master of the old dower house, and there he lived years after his patron died, though for a "long" time he was unable to do more than hobble in and out of the shop just to pay his respects to the old customers he was no longer able to serve. Mr. Francis Shrugg, who in his boyhood had often dabbled in chemistry under Jeremiah's superintendence, had faithfully observed his grandfather's wishes respecting him, and till death the chemist remained master of the queer old house and shop in Clack High Street.

News of his death came one morning when the Shruggs were breakfasting.

"Mr. Theodore's letter will amuse you," Mr. Francis Shrugg said, passing the note to his wife.

"Who is Mr. Theodore, papa?" It was Norah who asked the question.

Norah, the fifth daughter, a very precocious young lady of fifteen; who, because she resembled her father both in person and taste

more than any of her sisters, could speak more freely and take more liberties in his presence than even Susy could; and Susy was the eldest, and was moreover engaged to be married.

But Norah's curiosity was snubbed.

"I haven't time to enter into his pedigree," her father said, with a knowing glance at his wife. "I dare say you'll find it in Burke, if you look in the right place."

Norah considered herself, and so she was, "very sharp" generally; but this time she failed to notice that her two elder sisters looked down as if they knew something worth hearing, and that a faint blush rose to her mother's face.

"Now, papa!" Norah exclaimed unsuspiciously, "how *can* you be so silly? Oh, I know, he's the shopman—will he keep the shop on, I wonder?"

"Really, Norah!" Mrs. Shrugg said, "you interfere in everything; I wish you would in-

terest yourself in your lessons as much as you do in things that only concern other people."

"I think I'll keep the shop myself," Mr. Shrugg said, with mock gravity; but even while he joined in the laugh his words caused, he sighed.

"What are the others?" his wife asked, pointing to two large unopened letters by his plate.

"Oh, circulars, I suppose," he answered; and then he asked for more coffee, and pushed the letters aside.

Before they all separate for the morning, these half a dozen daughters may as well be introduced to the reader. First comes Susy—sweet Susy Shrugg, as one or two infatuated youths called her. Susy, whose soft, fair face had looked a little grave and drooping ever since H. M. S. ship *Lion* had sailed from Portsmouth with Lieutenant William Somers, who had gone to join his battery at Poogallah, there to pick up laurels or fever, medals or

cholera. A ring on her pretty left hand, and a corpulent locket, according to the fashion of the day, to warn the beholder of her engagement; while to Susy's simple, devoted heart they represented a very sacred tie never to be broken in this world or the next. Susy Shrugg, with her large soft eyes, her rippling hair, her graceful figure, and above all, her tender, honest disposition, might have been expected to marry well. I mean *well*, according to the general acceptation of the word; for instance, an elderly peer, or a rich merchant: at least to marry a fine house, handsome carriages, etc. But Susy had given her whole soul to a lieutenant with nothing but his pay; had passed her word to keep what might be a long engagement, during which she would lose her youth, may be, in vague expectation for the promotion that would not come; and would perhaps find herself stranded when that blooming youth had gone, bereft even of the consolation of mourning her lover as his widow. At least, this is

how her friends put the case before her. Her parents could only withhold their consent till they saw how deeply the young peoples' happiness was concerned, when they gave in cheerfully and kindly; but Susy herself took a very different view, she had few forebodings, none about her own or her lover's constancy. She said little on the subject, but hope was very strong in her breast; and her happy smiles as she brooded on his words and letters were more than tears for his absence. At twenty-one, life still wears its brightest hues; and sweet Susy Shrugg counted more sunshine than gloom in her life's future yet.

Margaret comes next, the handsomest of all the sisterhood; and she knew it too; but with all her beauty she was preserved from conceit of it by the humbling fact, that though at first every one bowed to her superior charms, and eagerly sought an introduction to her, yet in the end it was Susy who had the lasting homage. Margaret knew the secret of her

elder sister's greater popularity; knew well enough that it lay in Susy's ability to sympathise with each one's joys and sorrows, were they ever so small and uninteresting; while she herself, with as warm a heart and a higher intellect, could not smile or weep in chorus. Circumstances would make her either a grand character or a discontented, self-contained one; at present she was only a rather haughty beauty, hardly conscious of her own power either of mind or person; there was neither ring nor locket in her possession; indeed, Miss Margaret was accustomed to speak rather slightingly of lovers; nevertheless, she had her day dreams and castles in the air, and none the less vivid and delightful because she kept them to herself, you may be sure.

The twins are the next in age. Bell and Linda, *alias* Ditto and Do, each having a profusion of silky brown curling hair, which they wore exactly alike.

Each having charming hazel eyes; and finely pencilled eyebrows, with the reddest lips and rosiest cheeks that ever dimpled into smiles. Their figures only differed: Bell was taller and more slender than Linda. She was more self-reliant, too; and whereas Linda could do nothing without Bell, Bell could decide very well without Linda. Nevertheless, even as they shared one name, neither being complete without the other, so they shared all the joys and troubles of their lives, and neither had as yet planned a plan or wished a wish in which the other was not prominent. That they could ever live apart, or have separate desires, were possibilities quite beyond their thoughts; giggling girls they were yet, barely recognised as young women; yet, seeing fun in everything, and enjoying life as all unsophisticated girls of their age should do, without a thought of its dark shadows any more than the schoolboy thinks of future dyspepsia and indigestion, when he passes his plate for a third help to pork pie.

Norah follows; a tall girl with long lean arms and inquisitive grey eyes, that now prying into every one's business, will by-and-by soften and gleam dangerously under the long black lashes. Norah stands out distinct from all her sisters; her hair was dark and straight, her complexion pale, her manner assured and, amongst her contemporaries, rather dictatorial.

"Norah really must be sent to school," Mrs. Shrugg was continually saying.

"O, mamma, she's such fun," Margaret would plead.

"Let her alone," was her father's decision, "she's the cleverest girl of the lot."

There is only little Nelly, now—a second Susy, and her mother's pet, and the introductions are over.

CHAPTER II.

RUINOUS INTEREST.

"WELL!" Mr. Shrugg exclaimed, looking at the twins, "so you 'came out' last night; did you enjoy your party?" As he spoke, he, as if unconsciously, put his unopened letters into his pocket.

"Very much," said Bell; "we danced a great deal; it was delightful."

"The supper, I suppose you mean!" said he slyly. "That's the only part I should care for; and so you got some one to dance with you, did you?"

The twins laughed and blushed.

"O, papa, I wish you'd go with us just once," Linda said, "there were older gentlemen than you dancing, too; Bell danced with one."

"Yes," said Margaret, "that ridiculous Mr. Seton, Mamma."

"Mr. Polkely Seton, Margaret," Bell interrupted.

"He corrected Mrs. Sims for introducing him as only 'Mr. Seton;' I was terrified of him, he was so stiff and grand. And he's ever so old," added Linda.

"How much is 'ever so old'?" cried Norah. "I wouldn't have danced with him."

"You ought to feel flattered," Mamma said, laughingly, "at being noticed by such a man. Why, Mrs. Sims was quite proud of him as her guest. She told me he is worth untold gold."

"A city man, I suppose?" asked Mr. Shrugg.

"Yes, I believe so." Both husband and wife had equally vague notions of *city* men. "But don't notice these silly girls, Francis; he's really a very gentlemanly person, and he's coming to call here."

"No!"

"Yes, it seems he knew some of your people somewhere, so, of course, when he said he

should like to make your acquaintance, I was obliged to say we should be happy to see him here."

There was a chorus of "Oh, mamma's" from the young ladies, and then Norah abruptly asked—"Is he married? for if not," added she, "he'll just do for Margaret!"

Mr. Shrugg laughed outright, as Margaret flushed up angrily. Margaret only enjoyed these remarks when they were aimed at others.

"You ridiculous child!——" she began, when her mother interrupted her with, "Norah, your thoughts are always running on absurdities; I won't have you read any more novels. Francis, I am sorry to say she sits up at night reading novels. We really must send her to school."

Mr. Shrugg rose. "Come with me, Norah," he said; "I want some pills made; Nelly shall have a few for her dinner!" and he patted his little girl's head, and drew Norah out of the room with him. "Now run away to your lesson," he said, as soon as the door was

shut behind them, "and don't let me hear any more complaints."

Norah threw her arms round his neck and kissed him, while tears in her eyes, and a strong determination in her heart to correct her faults for his sake, proved how a word from him had power over her. All that morning she was wonderfully docile, but alas! her docile moods were very few and short.

Meantime, her father, alone in his study, read the letters supposed to be circulars, with a face that lengthened as he read. Twice, three times, he read and weighed every word, and then he sat meditating till his wife came briskly into the room full of domestic business.

"We must have the Welsh mutton cooked to-day," she began; but, struck by her husband's face, she broke off suddenly.

"Well!" he exclaimed, sitting up as if quite alert.

"You don't look well!" she added; "what is it?"

There was a short silence; his face worked, his eyes drooped, his fingers nervously grasped the arm of his chair. How should he tell her? Then she broke the pause.

"Francis," she said, going close to him and laying her hand on his shoulder; "Are you ill, love? do tell me."

The anxious love in her voice determined him to tell her all, and by degrees he told her all.

It was no unusual story. Knowing nothing of business he had suffered himself to become a shareholder in some company that had paid him twenty per cent. interest *once*, in return for a few thousand pounds. Again and again he had sunk a few hundreds more, to insure larger profit on his thousands, but again the profits were delayed; and, in fact, nothing was forthcoming but promises. Within the last week only had he suspected the true state of the case, and that very morning his suspicions were verified. The company had failed, and

Mr. Francis Shrugg's liabilities as a shareholder threatened to become very serious.

It took him a long time to tell all this, and he spoke with shame. Horror-stricken as was his wife, she was too true a woman to smite the fallen; her soft hand grasped his tighter, as she heard of the probable loss of every penny she and her children possessed—except her own small marriage settlement, and even at the first glance of the utter ruin that seemed so inevitable, she seemed to be most in need of pity.

"My poor Francis!" she only said; but perhaps the tender yearning pity in her voice was a keener reproach to his conscience than angry words. And yet Mrs. Shrugg was not a weak worshipper, seeing no fault in her husband because she loved him; he had before this acted unwisely and weakly, to his own and her disadvantage; and she had known it and grieved over it, and in her womanly way tried to "improve the occasion" a little; but all

former trials were as nothing compared with this: yet she said nothing but "My poor Francis!" reading in his averted face and trembling hand, how his punishment was already greater than he could bear.

Then she drew him on to talk the matter over bravely and carefully, but at the end of two hours, the only conclusion to be drawn was that nearly half his property was already literally swallowed up, and his share of further liabilities would be not only possibly but probably, more than he had to pay.

"Does Mr. Sims know?" Mrs. Shrugg asked.

No. Mr. Shrugg had known so well the answer that careful solicitor—his oldest friend—would have given, that he had avoided all mention of his speculation before him—and indeed before any sound man of business, it seemed—and had gone headlong to ruin with so much precaution against preservation from it, that it came upon him—overwhelmed him—

before a hand could be outstretched to save him.

"You'll speak to him now?" Mrs. Shrugg said, alluding to their old friend and neighbour.

The thought of this confession was very bitter, but if any man could yet help him, that man was Mr. Sims.

"Yes," he answered after a pause; "Yes, I'll go to Sims to-morrow."

"Wouldn't it be best to go now, dear?"

He made an impatient gesture, then checked himself. "Very well, I'll go now," he answered; "but you'll go with me?"

"Yes," she said, rising quickly. "We'll take a cab; it's a long way to John Street."

As she had calculated it would, her presence in Mr. Sims' office prevented the lawyer using harsh language to his old school-fellow; he bit his lips, and puckered his brows, and put questions sharply, but he was not altogether unkind, though he had no comfort to give. "The Company was a swindle from beginning

to end," he declared; "he had seen their lying prospectus, and prophesied their fate. No, there was no saving clause. The sums Mr. Shrugg had already *invested*"—he spoke this word with angry sarcasm,—"were of course gone for ever, and in all probability a considerable additional sum would have to follow; he might save something; all depended on the number of affluent men amongst the dupes; but he would make inquiries, and find out, if possible, how the land lay.

And as the husband and wife returned home, they felt they had received no comfort.

"I must tell the girls?" the latter asked, as they reached their own door.

"Would you—yet?"

"I think we should; they are sure to notice something is amiss. We must avoid all unnecessary expenses till we know how matters stand; and how can we refuse them customary pleasures without seeming unreasonable, unless we explain?"

"Well, you know best." But he shrank from meeting his children, and refused to join the early dinner, till Susy went into his room.

"Dear papa," she said, "Mamma says you have had bad news, but it may turn out better than you suppose," and then she kissed him.

His voice shook as he murmured "*You'll* be taken care of, my darling; I felt the first bit of comfort remembering that."

Then she coaxed him into the dining room; but there he was overpowered completely. Margaret and Norah were both moved by one common instinct to go and kiss him mutely, and express their love and sympathy; the twins, catching the infection, followed their example; and Nelly, only half understanding what it all meant, went up too, and flung her arms round his neck.

All this unobtrusive family love and forbearance broke him down; he fairly burst into tears, and ran out of the room. But how

sweet these tears were; and how they robbed his heart of half its bitterness!

This is a simple chronicle of family joys and sorrows, and as such does not intend to touch upon specious swindling companies at ruinous interest, or money complications; it will therefore only just tell in few words how Mr. Shrugg's hope and fear alternated for two or three long months before he knew his doom. There was one loophole of escape for him, discovered by Mr. Sims' lynx eyes; by it he could have crept out of his difficulties with the remainder of his capital *untaxed;* but in a strictly honourable view there would have clung to his garments, metaphorically speaking, a little mud from the mode of exit; and poverty was preferable to even the shadow of dishonour.

The end was that Francis Shrugg, Esq., once heir to an estate of £6,000 or £7,000 a year, found himself, with his half-dozen handsome daughters and a wife to keep, left well-nigh moneyless, a few hundred pounds

alone remaining of his £20,000. But already he had a scheme to avoid either parting with his children, or accepting help from his relations; and this, with the obstinacy so prominent in his character, he was determined to carry out. Friends might and did call him mad, culpable, mean-spirited—and this opinion was that of the majority; but the minority declared him honourable, sensible, and praiseworthy. The reader can choose between the two verdicts; I advocate neither, to avoid all censure. His decision was startling—I admit that; *very* startling in what is called good society, being neither more nor less than a resolution to go and keep that once despised shop in far-away Clack. It was a gentlemanly business, luckily—a business that need not demean itself by asking what other article was required; also Mr. Shrugg would live among people who knew his ancient prosperity, and close to where his near relation still reigned in state. He could follow his favourite studies, too; and having a good as-

sistant, need never serve petty customers in the shop himself. The old dower house afforded ample space for a large family, and had many conveniences unobtainable in modern houses in the south at a rent suitable to their fallen fortunes.

"Why not let the house and business?" Mrs. Shrugg asked, when this decision was first communicated to her. But rent in Clack was very low. £20 or £30 a year was the most the largest houses were let for; and the business had no doubt fallen away during old Clacker's long decay. A large sum for that was therefore very unlikely to be realized.

Poor Mrs. Shrugg! she met her downfall bravely and calmly, but she could not all at once submit to sink down behind a counter in a buried-alive place in out-of-the-way Yorkshire. She knew from books how bleak and barbarous those Yorkshire wilds were; and though she was persuaded, she thought more of her girls than of herself. She shuddered

as she pictured her future life, far removed from the little refinements and excitements to which she had been so long accustomed. But she said nothing when she saw how determined her husband was. He could be obstinate on occasion: had he not proved this when he persisted in his marriage? Friends might sneer, relations might argue; his mind was made up.

"I don't think you have any right to drag our name down in the dust in this way," wrote his cousin Robert, the squire of Shrugg Park. "Surely our near relationship warrants your acceptance of an annual allowance from me."

"My dear Robert," was the answer;—"I am not going to drag our name down in the dust; indeed it would be raised higher than it ever has been, if I painted it above the coloured bottles! Seriously, I am too proud to accept any one's allowance, so long as I can help myself. I won't paint up 'Shrugg, druggist,' though, out of deference to your

wishes; and I won't serve any one who comes in for a pennyworth of hair oil. For the rest, be assured I appreciate your intended kindness."

And then the world—the Shrugg's world—shrugged its shoulders, and raised its hands, and prepared to pass such an infatuated man by on the other side. And the time drew on when No. 99, Sussex Gardens, must be deserted, and the rooms which had so long echoed to girlish voices be left to silence; but the Sussex Gardens world had to be still further astonished before the final exit.

CHAPTER III.

"AH! HA! THE WOOIN' O'T."

"I'm sure he's very polite; this is his third call," Mrs. Shrugg exclaimed, as she took up a gentleman's visiting card, left while she was out one afternoon. "I wish you could see him Francis."

"Who is it?"

"Mr. Polkely Seton."

At whose name the girls began to giggle, especially Norah.

Mr. Shrugg looked inquiringly.

"O, papa," began Norah, "we watched him—Linda and I did—and he's so stiff; he came on horseback, and beckoned to a policeman to ring the bell; and he's so prim, and just like a clean poker;" and then Nelly went off into smothered laughter; and the

twins grinned, and the elder girls looked as if a very little more would set them off too.

"I shall tell him what you say," said papa, "and I shall look out for a school for you at once. At all events," he added gravely, he must be a kind man to trouble himself about us now. I wonder why he does?"

"Mamma, is he married?"

Of course Norah was the questioner.

Mrs. Shrugg looked amused; perhaps the same idea was in her own, as was in Norah's thoughts.

"I don't know; I believe not," she answered.

Then Norah nodded towards Margaret meaningly.

"Well done, Norah!" Mr. Shrugg exclaimed; "Margaret evidently appreciates your innuendo."

Margaret looked the personification of offended dignity.

"Indeed, papa," she cried, "Norah is too impertinent. I have not spoken two words

to him. Susy has; they made a dead set at each other; and such an old creature, too—the very idea!"

Susy's soft voice broke in.

"Well, papa, Margaret looked so awfully tall when he spoke to her, that I was obliged to make up by being extra civil."

"Quite right, Susy; those giddy girls must be taught good manners; but you need not waste your imagination, Norah," he added very gravely. "You must remember our changed position now: rich men of Mr. Seton's standing don't look after poor druggists' daughters" a remark that silenced and sobered even Miss Norah.

But the world is not so bad as is said; and that very evening Mr. Shrugg had to revoke his opinion.

"'Mr. Poker Severe' has been again," Norah announced, as she laid a card and a note by her father. "Isn't that a good name for him? Linda, and I made it up."

"An invitation, no doubt," Mr. Shrugg said. "What a fine seal!"

"Now we shall hear if he's married," Margaret exclaimed. "Now, papa,—Mr. and Mrs. Polkely Seton." Mr. Shrugg opened his letter. and as he was accustomed with all letters but those on business, at once began reading the contents aloud.

"101, HYDE PARK GARDENS.

"Ah! that's a capital situation. He's a man of taste, you see, Susan."

"MY DEAR SIR."—

"Very cordial, considering I've never seen the fellow yet."

"Failing to obtain an interview with you, and hearing from our mutual friends, Mr. and Mrs. Sims, that you are to leave town shortly, I am obliged to take this means of requesting your permission to pay my"—

Here Mr. Shrugg stopped short,—while his eyes ran on a little further, and a decided flush overspread his face. "What upon earth?"—

he began again, looking round on his wife and daughters whose curiosity was roused, and who all looked back at him with wide-opened, questioning eyes.

"What upon earth does the man mean?"

"Well, let us hear what he says," Mrs. Shrugg very sensibly answered.

But he turned very white now, and his hand trembled as he silently finished the letter; then he passed it to his wife.

"You read it first; perhaps you can understand it, I can't," he said.

There was silence while Mrs. Shrugg read it; but each daughter was aware that she was the object of close scrutiny from her father the while; and each began to fear she had given individual offence to the writer, and was the subject of complaint. At last Mrs. Shrugg laid the note down, and exclaimed emphatically—

"It is a hoax."

"Ah!" Mr. Shrugg caught eagerly at the suggestion.

"No doubt of it," mamma continued; "we don't know his crest and writing—of course it is; and Norah," as she turned angrily, "Norah, is this your doing?"

Norah had once or twice counterfeited invitations so successfully that Susy and Margaret had been completely taken in; but Norah was innocent in this matter, and declared her innocence, with tears.

"As if I should try to humbug Papa!" she said.

"I can tell if it's a hoax," Margaret said; "one of his cards had his address in writing. Norah, go and look if it is in the hall-basket yet."

Yes, the card was there; and a comparison of the writing proved it to be genuine.

"May we not hear the letter?" Susy asked.

The father hesitated, and looked at his wife. The latter handed the note back to him.

"Yes, let them hear it," she answered. "It is too late now to withhold it. Norah, mind

you are not to repeat all this, not even to Nelly."

And Mr. Shrugg began again—

"My dear Sir,—Failing to obtain an interview with you, and hearing from our mutual friends, Mr. and Mrs. Sims, that you are to leave town shortly, I am obliged to take this means of requesting your permission to pay my addresses to your daughter. The peculiarity of our positions, will, I trust, excuse my seeming abruptness. I need hardly ask the favour of an immediate answer, as I am sure you will be aware of my anxiety until I hear from you. Until then, I forbear to enter further into my circumstances.

"With sincere regards to Mrs. Shrugg, and all your party, I beg to remain,

"Yours very faithfully,

"Jason Polkely Seton."

"Now, young ladies," Mr. Shrugg ex-

claimed, as he finished the astounding letter, "perhaps one of *you* can explain this?"

"Of course it's a hoax, it must be," Margaret said; "but who would do it? but doesn't he say which of us he means, papa?"

"You've heard every word."

"He can't mean *me*," Susy said softly, while her hand stole up to her locket.

"Well, he certainly can't mean us," said Bell; "that would be too absurd!" and all agreed it must be either Susy or Margaret, unless it was, as all felt it must be, a trick.

But then, as Margaret said, who would play them such a trick?

"You know," Susan remarked sapiently, "it isn't as if he were a young man, and we had been seen much with him; we haven't met him above three times altogether,—once before the Sims' party, once there, and once at the botanical fête."

And Susy laughed roguishly, remembering how she had hidden behind an azalea bed to avoid being joined by him.

Mr. and Mrs. Shrugg were much annoyed.

"If you notice the letter, and it should be a hoax, how dreadfully awkward it would be," the latter exclaimed; "but if he has really written it, and you take no notice, that would be as bad; what can you do, Francis? Has any one joked you about him?"

Papa cried in utter dismay and vexation, "Can Emily Clayton have written this?"

Emily Clayton was the daughter of a neighbour, a very rich but very uneducated woman; but who, because her mother had been a dear friend of Mrs. Shrugg's, in youth, was one of their most intimate associates. Being very much older than the Shrugg young ladies, and accustomed from her girlhood to act independently, she was, in many respects, a convenient and safe companion; but that she was capable of originating or carrying out any scheme beyond the retrimming of a gown, or the organization of a dinner, was an idea not to be entertained for one instant. Besides,

she knew nothing of Mr. Seton's acquaintance with them.

"We never dreamt of mentioning him to any one," Margaret said, loftily.

"The Sims' are not likely to have done it?" Mr. Shrugg continued; yet he felt convinced, without the assurance of his family, which was immediately against such a supposition, that his steady old neighbours were quite incapable of committing such folly.

"Well, then, what *is* to be done?"

Poor Mr. Shrugg! he was seriously perplexed; and as he looked round and saw no help in the bewildered faces of wife and children, he became quite angry.

"All I can say, is," he said testily, "this is beyond a joke, and I will never speak to the author of it again. A most unwarrantable liberty. What *is* to be done, Susan?"

Luckily for him, Mrs. Shrugg's woman's wit was only at a loss for a moment; it came to his aid now. Her plan was for him to call on

Mr. Seton that evening. He could easily give, as a reason for going at such a time, his desire to find that gentleman at home after missing him so often.

"*He* will begin about the letter, if he wrote it," she added; "and if he does not, you may be sure it is a trick."

And this way of obviating the difficulty being voted good, Mr. Shrugg set off to carry it out.

There was no small amount of talk amongst his daughters in his absence. Of course the letter was a hoax; still there was a little uncertainty about it, and until that was removed, it was natural to debate on both sides.

"It is just what a queer man like Mr. Seton, would do," Norah said, who never having spoken to him, was very competent to give such an opinion, as Bell told her severely.

Susan said it was very handsome behaviour for a rich man like him; but then Susan felt

secure; and could afford to praise her sisters' suitors.

Margaret didn't agree to this, and began rather to hope he meant her, that she might tell him how presumptuous it was for a man of his age, however rich, to fancy a girl of twenty could be happy with him.

The twins got tired of the subject soonest; but then they had no personal interest in the question. Linda told Margaret she ought to accept so good an offer, if only to lighten her father's expenses; and Margaret retorted that she, Linda, would not accept a husband on such terms if she were tried.

"No," said Linda, self-convicted; "but then, you like carriages and nice houses, and I don't. I mean, Margaret, dear, you are more fitted for grand things than I am; but of course I didn't mean you'd marry only for that."

"Besides," said Susan, "you know, Margaret tried to lighten papa's expenses: she wanted to be a governess."

"Poor papa!" Margaret said; "I shall never forget how cut up he was, when I proposed it; and I was so relieved when he declared he would rather starve than let any of us leave home, for I should *hate* teaching."

"I shouldn't," cried Norah; "I should delight in keeping nasty little children in order. Wouldn't I give them hard sums."

"We might give lessons, though, without leaving home," Susan said.

"O Susy, William wouldn't like it; besides, you'll go out to India as soon as he gets his captaincy. Linda and I mean to coax papa to have a little school at Clack," Bella exclaimed.

"What would you two children teach?" Margaret said, laughing: "the idea of you two teaching; why, you ought to be at school yourselves."

And then they all laughed; the twins, too, at the absurd notion; and at that moment Mr. Shrugg's latch-key was heard at the front door.

Norah jumped off her seat and listened at the drawing-room door, whence she informed her sisters that her mother had gone into the hall to meet her husband, and both had shut themselves up in the library.

The excitement now became very great.

"Oh! dear, if only I were old enough!" Norah cried, "and he asked me, *I* would have him; I rather prefer elderly gentlemen—young men are so conceited—and I would have you all to stay with me, and introduce you to rich husbands, and we'd have such good luncheons while he was in the city; and often drive to Richmond, and buy Maids of Honour."

"No one would have you," Bella exclaimed! "You are too fussy and ridiculous, and you know nothing about young men; so don't pretend to despise them."

"Oh!" cried Margaret, "you are touched, Miss Bell. I'm sure that Mr. Frederick Lington is conceited enough,—he's a butterfly."

"*I* like him," said Linda.

"*I* don't," said Susy; "and if I were Bell, I would'nt dance with him so often; he's a regular flirt."

"So he is," said Bell, crimsoning; "*I* don't care for him; he's Emily Clayton's friend, not mine."

"O Bell!" cried three of her sisters, "Emily Clayton is old enough to be his mother—now don't pretend!" And here Mrs. Shrugg's voice rang up to them, calling—

"Susy!"

"I knew it was you. There now—oh! be quick back and tell us all about it." With which explanations, Susy was hustled out of the room, while the others remained almost breathless, awaiting her return.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. POLKELY SETON.

BUT it wasn't Susy.

As Mr. Shrugg walked towards Hyde Park Gardens, he felt very nervous; it was evening, and the streets were comparatively quiet, so he could think without having his thoughts interrupted; and as he walked and thought, the errand on which he was bound began to assume formidable proportions.

Suppose Mr. Seton had a dinner-party, and the servant took him for one of the expected guests, how awkward it would be; he must reconnoitre the aspect of the house first before he rang, to avoid such a disagreeable—

Or suppose Mr. Seton were out, the explanation would be postponed, and the dilemma heightened, for he could'nt call again next day; and what could he write? Mr.

Shrugg smelt neither the sweet fragrance of the balcony flowers above him, nor saw the beauty of the setting sun streaming over the trees of Kensington Gardens, as he turned round from Westbourne Street into the Bayswater Road. He had taken the longest way round, to give himself more time for consideration, but the longest way was very short; and as he reached his destination, he felt as he had never felt since the day when he called upon his father-in-law elect to ask for a wife.

Every one knows Hyde Park Gardens—how bright the one side, how gloomy the other; surely no dun would ever summon up resolution to pull the bell under those huge closed porticos, nor speak insolently on those majestic thresholds; but then, of course, people who can afford to live in such fine houses never require dunning, the very supposition is insulting. If Mr. Shrugg could have approached Mr. Seton's house from the other

side, through the gardens which bloomed up to the very windows, and at that hour and season were sweet and fair, with evening fragrance and summer luxuriance, he would have gone in with recovered spirits; but as he was obliged to follow the pavement, and No. 101 was nearly at the end of the sombre row, the matter on which he went grew quite serious before he arrived there. No other person was in sight; cats sat here and there, solemnly sleeping within the gigantic area railings, but there was no other living thing; the very kitchens, down in the profound depths, seemed untenanted; and his footsteps reverberated with hollow precision; the light was as that in a dim great wood. The moment's waiting at the huge black door, the entry into the dark, carpeted hall, the mysterious whisper of the gentlemanly black-coated butler who preceded him into the vast dining-room, still further depressed him; and at the first glance he had of the tall, thin, elderly man who rose

from his chair at the further end of a long table spread with dessert to greet him, he felt more than ever convinced he had come on a fool's errand. If he had not been so nervous himself, he might have seen the nervousness of his host; indeed, both gentlemen showed embarrassment, and the first few sentences exchanged between them were prim, polite, commonplaces.

Nevertheless, distant though they were, they mentally took each other's measurement. And great contrast they presented. Mr. Shrugg was ruddy, hazel-eyed, brown-haired, with that comfortable look that always characterizes a happy family man. His troubles had not perceptibly aged him yet; and though he did grieve over them at first, he was already almost reconciled to this great change of position, for he had still all he prized most—wife and children. He was a handsome man, without a shade of affectation about him, with an honest, kindly face, sobered by middle age,

yet with the reflection of a merry, healthy youth still upon it.

Mr. Polkely Seton was about the same age, perhaps a year or so younger, but he looked older; his face was deeply lined, yet more from silent thought than care, for he had been a successful man. An only son, well educated, he had succeeded to a good estate in a long-established Russian firm. First as junior, and then as senior partner, he was now worth almost what Mrs. Sims had told Mrs. Shrugg —untold gold. But whereas Mr. Shrugg, landless and nearly moneyless, looked the personification of comfort, Mr. Seton had the appearance of being beset with anxiety. Not that his dress was at fault,—that was faultless, scrupulously neat and handsome, and, while strictly in the prevailing fashion, well suited to his time of life. His dark brown eyes were keen and yet emotionless, like the eyes of a bird that look full at you, and yet express nothing; his nose was long and thin, and when he

was thinking, his eyes seemed looking down his nose; his mouth was very thin-lipped, and the wrinkles on either side were remarkably deep; his hair was dark brown, perfectly lank, and brushed straight down, as if with water,—very little hair there was, but it was unmixed with grey, though it had worn off the crown which rose from it white and shining; he had very sloping shoulders, and a very long neck, yet he had an easy, manly figure, and was unmistakably gentlemanly in his movements and appearance; prim is the most appropriate term to convey his general expression, and the rose in his coat that never seemed to droop or fade, grew prim too by the contact. Always erect, always well dressed, always calm and collected, a man who would cross the most crowded street without hurrying, and witness the most pathetic play outwardly unmoved; a man from whom the veriest beggar would turn without asking alms, and

of whom no child would presume to ask the time.

Mr. Shrugg, sitting before him, felt that he was the most unlikely person alive to make a romantic match; but Mr. Shrugg's judgment was not infallible.

"These are fine houses," the visitor said, looking round on the large, well-furnished room, after politely excusing his late call, and receiving a polite welcome. "I have not been in one before."

"Yes, they are nice houses," Mr. Seton said, "but I don't use much of this, as you can imagine. I hardly enter my drawing-rooms, except when my friends are good enough to visit me."

"And the garden is so pleasant," Mr. Shrugg continued, turning towards the windows, afraid to be silent a moment, lest the other should suspect anything.

"Ah! I don't care for gardens," Mr. Seton replied, "but they are pleasant, no doubt; it is a healthy situation."

Mr. Shrugg supposed it was. And so the discourse went on in an equally slow and uninteresting manner, till both felt the situation was becoming desperate. Then Mr. Seton pushed on a little, and hoped Mr. and Mrs. Shrugg would dine with him before they left town; he also believed the young ladies were musical, perhaps they would be good enough to come also, and give their opinion of his new piano.

Mr. Shrugg feared they had no time for parties; "and," he added with a little dignity, "no longer the power to receive our friends in return."

"Oh, this shall be no party—only our mutual acquaintances, Mr. and Mrs. Sims," Mr. Seton exclaimed almost eagerly; "or if you prefer it, not even them."

"You are very good; but—"

"It is you who will be good," Mr. Seton interrupted. "Your relation, Mr. Robert Shrugg, was a college friend of my late

brother-in-law; would you like me to invite him?"

"He's not in town, and I think I rather vexed him the other day,—he meant well, but I was rather quick, perhaps; however, he and I are too good cousins to quarrel. But, as I said, we have given up parties."

"No, no—indeed—on this occasion, surely."

Mr. Shrugg began to feel less sure the letter was a hoax, and to see that there was evident nervousness in his new friend's manner. The evening was drawing on, he had come with the express purpose of unravelling a mystery, and could not go home with it but half unwound. This family invitation was decidedly suspicious; but still, though the words were cordial, the manner continued prim and merely polite. He was a man of the world—if not a worldly man—why should he show attention where there was nothing to be gained in return? Altogether, Mr. Shrugg felt something decisive must be got at, but how to get at it was the difficulty.

"Thank you," he said, speaking abstractedly, as one speaks whose thoughts are not with his speech; but we are very busy,—altogether too much occupied for visiting; we shall leave town in a month or so. In fact, as I said before," and here he began to see an opening, "I should hardly have cared to cultivate your acquaintance, but for your civility in calling so often; we are hardly in a position to make new friends now."

Mr. Seton bowed solemnly, and made a little moral reflection about misfortune being the time when friends are most wanted.

"I see so many men in my business experience fall and rise," he continued, "that I do not regard it in the light you appear to do. Of course I have heard of your losses; it would be useless if I tried to make you think I did not understand your allusion just now; but, no doubt, like others, you will soon right again."

"Nay," said Mr. Shrugg, forcing himself to make the avowal; "I have lost all for always;

you forget I am not in a profession, and likely to re-make a fortune; I possess nothing but a house and shop in Yorkshire, and I am going there to support my family by selling drugs."

It cost him much to say this. There was an instant's silence after: Mr. Shrugg was feeling acutely afresh the greatness of his loss; and Mr. Seton was taken aback at what seemed, at first, little short of madness for a gentleman voluntarily to sink so low. That was his *first* thought, the thought of a rich man of the world, to whom what is called "position" is the first consideration. But he quickly grasped the honesty of the intention, and recognised the true dignity of independence.

"My dear sir," he exclaimed, bending forward, and for the moment his face lost all its hard, deep lines, "that seems a radical measure, but I respect you for it; if we had more men of the same mind, we should have no need to keep up palaces for pauper gentility, nor would our courts teem with records against

the oldest names in the land. False pride, sir, lays more men low than ever rash speculation does; it is the great sin of Englishmen."

Mr. Shrugg was by no means without that besetting failing which clings to most men who are educated without aim—eldest sons of county men, most of them—who have no need to exercise their talents professionally, nor ambition to move out of the beaten track their fathers trod before them; who live and move in a circle of neighbouring squirearchy, and have only one strong and deeply rooted belief—the belief in caste.

Had Mr. Seton been only a rich merchant, he would have cared less for his good opinion; but as he was also a member of a good family, it came with additional force.

Mr. Shrugg was by no means a perfect character. Though he was self-denying and excellent in every moral obligation, he could be both weak and obstinate, and would not have blamed his oldest friends for cutting him in his

altered state, for he morbidly exaggerated his fallen circumstances; at the same time he would himself cling closer to any friend who fell as he had fallen. Human nature is an anomaly—Mr. Shrugg was but human. Mr. Seton's words were like balm to him, coming as if to reassure him he had not forfeited all claim to be a member of the only society which custom and education had taught him was the best. Here was one man—and might there not be many more—who applauded his conduct and courted his regard still? Towards this man he felt grateful and cordial, and his confidence ran on, warmed by the sympathy.

"My own relations, and my wife's, say I am about to blight my children's prospects," he continued; "some have offered to relieve me—as they put it—of one or two of my daughters; they declare that even the drudgery of a companion's life is more eligible than the life I am about to condemn them to; but, thank God, we all agree that so long as we can keep

together, we will do so; and by going at once into Yorkshire, we are assured of a good house, and at least, an income sufficient for every desirable comfort.

Mr. Shrugg had been carried away by his eagerness to vindicate himself completely; but he remembered the main subject in time to take advantage of this opening; and in case Susan should be the object of his new friend's regard, added, as if it naturally formed part of his preceding remarks—

"We cannot hope to be all together long, for my eldest girl is to be married as soon as young Somers gets his company; I daresay you've seen him at Sims'?" Then Mr. Shrugg considerately withdrew his eyes from Mr. Seton, who turned his chair more with its back to the light, as he replied—

"Oh! yes, so I've heard. No, I never saw the young man; but you cannot expect to keep any of your young ladies long, with their attractions."

Here it was Mr. Shrugg's turn to bow, and Mr. Seton, keeping his face well away from the light, went on.

"I was particularly struck with them when I had the pleasure of meeting them at Mrs. Sims' dance."

And again Mr. Shrugg made a little bow, saying nothing, as indeed there was nothing to be said.

Mr. Seton went on with a just perceptible tremor in his voice.

"Particularly with the youngest, I didn't catch her Christian name; but I hope, in short, my dear sir, as I have already stated in my note, I have a very especial interest in her."

This was plain speaking,—at least the speaker so meant it,—but it perfectly puzzled his hearer. Nelly was his youngest daughter, and he grew quite confused about Nelly and Mrs. Sims, until gradually through the mental mist the truth came to him; the twins were his youngest daughters at Mrs. Sims' dance.

He was only just able to check the expression of amazement that rose to his lips, and to substitute, before Mr. Seton noticed his hesitation, the more proper ejaculation of "Indeed!"

It was hardly a gracious way for a penniless man to receive overtures of marriage for his penniless girl from a rich man, and Mr. Seton felt it to be so.

"I trust my answer is to be favourable?" he said, stiffly.

"My youngest daughter!" stammered Mr. Shrugg, "I—I must ask you to explain further."

"Surely," said Mr. Seton, "the young lady herself"—

"To speak the truth," cried the other, fairly unable to continue such Machiavellian diplomacy; "to speak the truth, none of us quite knew to which of my daughters you alluded; and, altogether, this is so short an acquaintance—"

"*I* am well known," Mr. Seton said. "I

have been a bachelor all my life; my name and that of my firm are letters of credit anywhere. *You* are well known, and your family and mine have been intimate for many years: it would, I allow, have seemed abrupt under other circumstances, but cannot be so considered in this case. I allow there is disparity of age, but in constitution I believe I am equal to a much younger man; and my fortune and the position I offer are assured."

"They are so very young," Mr. Shrugg said; "they—we never dreamt you could mean one of them."

"Ah! there is the charm," Mr. Seton exclaimed. "It is their unsophisticated manner, their want of worldly-mindedness, that so charmed me; most young ladies of the present day forget the meaning of such words as modesty and reticence. I myself had forgotten the old fashioned beauty of shamefacedness in girlhood till I met your daughter."

"Which daughter?" asked Mr. Shrugg.

"I did not catch the name; she has hazel eyes."

"Both have eyes alike."

"A very pretty figure."

"Then it was Bell." Mr. Shrugg admired plump figures the most.

"Ah! Bell," Mr. Seton's voice lingered on the name, lover-like; "she is taller than her sister," he added.

"Eh! let me see. No; then it is Linda."

"Linda," Mr. Seton ejaculated slowly. "Linda;" then with an amused smile, he added, "I really think that was the name; but she was at the flower-show with Mrs. Sims."

Mr. Shrugg remembered then that Linda had driven there alone with Mrs. Sims, and this proved the identity. Yes; it was Linda, at whose feet this rich elderly man would sue; and as her father thought of her almost childish habits and tastes, he nerved himself up to put an end to Mr. Seton's hopes at once.

"I more than appreciate the value of your

proposal," he said, "and I sincerely admire your disinterestedness; but Linda is a mere child—totally unsuited to you, or indeed to any man as a wife at present; her tastes are unformed, and her education hardly finished"—

"Stop; stop," Mr. Seton interposed, with almost boyish eagerness. "That very argument you use against your daughter, is altogether for her, in my opinion. I covet a wife who will conform to *my* tastes—and that is why I choose a *young* lady; a woman of what you would call suitable age for me, would be wholly independent of me in will and mind."

He stopped, and Mr. Shrugg weakly said, "Very true."

"Speaking as one man of sense to another," Mr. Seton continued, leaning forward and enforcing his words with emphatic movements of his head, "I tell you, candidly, I have thought very deeply on the subject; and I am sure I should have the majority of sensible men on my side, whenI say, that I can offer

a very satisfactory rate of exchange for youth and beauty. With me your daughter will have a safe protector, and every advantage money can buy."

"All very true; but the child would never consent to leave us all."

Mr. Seton smiled indulgently. "I dare say all parents think alike," he said; "but I must remind you that 'nature prompts women to leave the most tender father for a husband.' I must request you to be good enough to deal fairly, and to allow the young lady to speak for herself."

Mr. Shrugg was in despair as to how he was to dismiss this hopeful swain. The idea of treating Linda as a responsible being—she who, of all his daughters, was the most sensitive and timid, and who but the other day, as it seemed, was in pinafores—was utterly untenable; and yet Mr. Seton's request that she should give him his answer, was reasonable enough, though to grant it was to entail un-

necessary pain on the girl. It never struck him that in his obstinate rejection he was throwing away that which most fathers would deem a magnificent alliance. Once more he tried to speak decidedly, but only succeeded in being foolish.

"My dear sir," he reiterated, "a girl of her age is not a suitable wife for a man like you."

"That is *my* look out," Mr. Seton said, loftily, "and your daughter's; may I call and see her to-morrow?"

"Yes; we had better leave it till to-morrow," Mr. Shrugg said, catching at the reprieve and rising with alacrity; and holding out his hand, he added, "you must excuse me, but I cannot conscientiously say you will be successful."

Mr. Seton let him reach the door, then called him back.

"One word more," he exclaimed, "I conclude you have no personal objection to me?"

Mr. Shrugg was compelled to assure him quite the contrary.

"And I suppose my position is also unquestionable?" he continued.

The answer was, of course, politely affirmative.

"Then," Mr. Seton exclaimed, opening the door, "I shall have the pleasure of waiting on Miss Linda to-morrow at two o'clock."

CHAPTER V.

AN ALARMING SACRIFICE.

Susy's stay down stairs seemed interminable to the curious expectants in the drawing-room; but she came back at last.

"You'll never guess!" she said, looking intensely excited and amused, "so I may as well tell you; it's neither you nor me, Margaret, but, *actually*, Linda!"

"Me!" cried Linda, "I don't believe it."

"And you are to go down to papa directly," Susan added.

"Papa doesn't want me to have him?" Linda asked, with a tremor in her voice, and instant tears, as she stood up irresolute.—"Bell, *you* go—"

"Don't be absurd," Margaret exclaimed; "papa isn't likely to want you to marry such a man."

"Take Bell with you, if you like," Susy said.

And Bell, laughing at her twin sister's horror, took her hand; and the two went down stairs, leaving Norah speechless for once with amazement.

Susy had been called down to give her opinion, and she had agreed with Mr. Seton so far as to the propriety of allowing Linda an unbiassed choice. But she, as well as her parents, knew well what that choice would be. Nevertheless, Mr. Shrugg faithfully put all the advantages of the match before his alarmed young daughter, and insisted on her taking time before she decided on refusing. Susy thought also that Linda should *herself* decline: that small concession must be granted. If Linda was old enough to have an offer, Susy argued, she was old enough to answer for herself.

So it was decided that Mr. Seton should be allowed to pay his promised visit, and that Linda herself should decline with thanks.

Linda was the least excited of all.

Mrs. Shrugg was elated that such a suitor had come at such a time, though she too thought but of one answer for him, which was, No.

Margaret thought Mr. Seton must be mad, but was delighted so romantic an event had happened to her Linda; and Norah protested it was Linda's duty to accept for the good of her family. But Norah did not dare give this opinion before either of her parents.

I do not think any of the family got much sleep that night; and as the next day wore on, Linda's nervousness became so great that her mother felt obliged to cancel part of the sentence, and to comfort her by promising to be present at the approaching interview. But though an alarming, it was also a great occasion; and Linda honoured it by wearing her best gown, and letting down the bright curls that reached below her small, round waist. She little thought how by enhancing her charms she was adding to her difficulties.

"I feel as I did when I dressed to be confirmed," she said, with a nervous little laugh, as Bell escorted her down to the drawing-room.

With a mock curtsey, the latter left her there; and all the others went away too, as it only wanted five minutes to two o'clock, leaving her and her mother together.

Mr. Shrugg protested that he had had his share the previous evening, and went out for a walk, purposely to avoid having to appear further.

Punctual to the moment, Mr. Seton rang at the door; and as he followed the servant up stairs, arranging his hair and flower as he stiffly ascended, he little thought there were six inquisitive eyes prying over the banisters upon his shining crown.

To Margaret, Norah, and Susy, who were holding their breath above him lest he should become aware of their vicinity, 'he had come upon a fool's errand.' Let us see how he fared.

Linda sat close to her mother, furtively holding the skirt of her gown, her colour coming and going, and her voice almost inarticulate with fear. Mr. Seton assumed a lively air, and pressed her hand, as he bowed over it, and thanked her for receiving him; he evidently expected a favourable issue to his visit.

First he inquired after Mr. Shrugg; and as he had expressed his esteem for the latter's independent course of action the previous night, so he now again declared his admiration for it. Linda was pleased at that, and took courage to lift her eyes gratefully to his, which emboldened her by no means bashful swain at once to go to the point.

"I hope you will give me the right to feel a more than friendly interest in him," he added, looking admiringly on her changing face.

She turned to her mother to answer for her, and Mrs. Shrugg took compassion, and spoke.

"Linda — indeed, we all," she said, "are

very conscious of the compliment you pay us, but—"

"Excuse me," Mr. Seton interrupted; "but Mr. Shrugg promised me to let her speak for herself."

He addressed Linda more than her mother; and though his tone was perfectly polite, it was also sufficiently determined to make Mrs. Shrugg say—

"Yes, that is true; but she is so accustomed to refer to me in everything that I hardly yet can remember that she is no longer a child. Linda, dear, you will tell Mr. Seton what you think."

"I think," Linda exclaimed, with downcast eyes, and fingers tightening over her mother's gown; "I would rather not marry any one; thank you."

This artless speech perfectly delighted him, and was by no means discouraging. He smiled, and nodded his head approvingly, and moved his chair a little nearer, as he said—

"I have always been told a lady's No means Yes. May I so consider it now?"

Linda had believed her answer would have had the effect of making him instantly depart; and totally unprepared for this rendering of it, she exclaimed in quick alarm,—

"No! I meant No; indeed I did, thank you; didn't I, mamma?"

Again she took the wrong course to convince him. He believed she was coerced for some extraordinary reason by her parents, and he determined to have her unbiassed opinion.

"My dear madam," he said to Mrs. Shrugg, "I must beg the favour of a *tête-à-tête* with Miss Linda. I fancy we could both be more eloquent if there were no third person present."

Mrs. Shrugg was vexed with Linda's timidity and childish way of treating the offer. It would do her good, she thought, to be thrown entirely on herself; so she rose without hesitation, and when the girl rose too with a

look of thorough alarm, she put her hand forcibly on her shoulder, and said—

"Well, I will leave you together, Linda," and then she shook hands with the visitor; and Linda, not daring to obey her strong desire to rush madly after her, sat down again with a mental determination to behave like a sensible woman.

Mr. Seton shut the door upon Mrs. Shrugg, and returned smilingly to his seat, which he again moved a little nearer to Linda.

"My dear young lady," he said, extending his hand as a doctor extends his hand to coax an alarmed patient, "permit me to hope you will change from dislike to matrimony in my favour?"

Linda's main idea was that he must be conciliated, or he would never go; so she timidly placed her hand in his while she repeated,—"No, thank you; indeed I don't mean to marry."

He kept tight hold of the hand.

"Why not?" he said.

"Because—because," and afraid to be rude, she added simply, "I don't know."

"You are very young," he said indulgently, "and indeed, I very much admire your timidity; but if you have no reason why you should not marry, you must allow me to say there *is no* reason. Do you consider me too old?"

"Oh, no!" cried she, gulping down the story.

"Do you dislike me?"

"Oh, no."

"Do you like any one else?"

"Oh, no; really no."

"Then why don't you marry me?"

"I don't like to leave them all," she said.

"But your sisters will all marry and leave you; and some day your father and mother will die, and then you will be sorry you have no home. I can offer you a home that you would soon like better than this."

This reasoning struck her, and seemed to condemn her to a life of single blessedness unless she accepted him.

"I mean, I don't want to marry *now*," she said, thinking this must explain and settle the question completely, whereas it had just the contrary effect.

"Not at this moment," he exclaimed jauntily, "but by-and-by; then—when we have seen a little more of each other, eh? Now we understand it, don't we? I thought we should get on when mamma went away," and he took possession of her other hand.

"You won't understand!" she cried in despair; "I don't want to marry for years and years. I can't leave them all now, papa would be so sorry."

"You are a dear little loving daughter," Mr. Seton said, perfectly unconscious of her disposition; "but do you not see that though papa cannot urge you to leave him, it would be a great relief to him to know you

were well married, and would also be a great help to all the others. You are inexperienced, my dear child, or you would know that as my wife you would be a valuable help to your sisters. I conscientiously tell you that your real duty is to marry well—to marry *me*."

He pleaded the like reasons Norah had put forth, and Linda's own words to Margaret rose against her: "If he asks you, it will be your duty to marry him." Was it possible her father and mother would really be thankful if she accepted him; and had they professed otherwise to prevent her sacrificing her inclinations?

Linda was in a sore strait. She had urged all her reasons for refusing him, and he had shown them to be no reasons. What more could she say? This refusing a man to his face was a much more difficult matter than she had imagined. He was very kind too; and it was rather pleasant to imagine herself

able to keep her family. All the girls had a natural shrinking from their future home over a shop, though they were not sufficiently experienced to see all its disadvantages; still, Linda preferred that idea to having a grand home of her own shared by Mr. Seton. But if it was her duty, and if it was certain she would be of use,—"He who hesitates is lost," says the proverb, and her hesitation was fatal now. Mr. Seton went on ably arguing his case, not as if bribing her acquiescence, for he sincerely believed she would be very happy as his wife; in fact, he believed the idea was grateful to her already. How could he suppose any girl could resist him, his position, and his riches?

Twenty minutes afterwards, the drawing-room bell rang, and Mr. Polkely Seton walked down stairs to be let out.

"This evening, at seven," he was heard by the overlookers on the upper landing to say; and no sooner had the front door closed upon

him, than down they flew to Linda, intensely curious to know why he had stayed so long, and what he was going to do at seven o'clock.

Linda had two bright spots on her cheeks, and looked much more excited than sorry, as she said—

"He's coming to see papa; and I've promised to marry him."

It is impossible to describe the amazement her announcement excited. Susy, looking at it from the height of sentimentality, declared it to be "too awful to believe;" but I must own that her other sisters looked more complacently on the gilding that encircled it. Mrs. Shrugg took her apart and discussed it all rationally; and fearing the girl was biassed and dazzled by the luxury offered her, she showed her how little that ought to weigh in such a matter as marriage?"

"Mamma," Linda asked earnestly, "if I liked him for himself, without thinking of his

money, should you be glad for me to have him ?"

The mother did not give her credit for subtlety, and answered unhesitatingly, that were Mr. Seton a man to be loved for himself alone, she would thankfully see her his wife. "None of you know yet how great will be the change in our life at Clack," she added; "for your sake, I would rejoice if you could really love him; but poverty is by no means the greatest evil in life—at the same time if you were ten years older, I should be glad to think you had chosen so worthy a man."

This was enough for Linda; she had no exalted idea of sacrifice, no maudlin, far-fetched, romantic view of martyrdom; she loved no one else; she might help Bell first, and she would be off poor papa's hands by marrying. Married life was a misty, far-off idea, in her childish mind. Unlike Norah, she had read very few novels; and unlike Norah, she had no taste for prying into other people's ways and means.

Mr. Seton was very kind; she dared say she should like him nearly as much as she liked her father; and it would be very nice having Bell and the others to stay with her. So she assured her mother—and her father, who seriously thought she ought not to be allowed to have a will of her own—that she wished to accept Mr. Seton. And before seven o'clock, the whole family were prepared to receive him as a future relation.

"I shan't call him Poker Severe any more," Norah said, as she put on a clean white frock in his honour; "but I shall always think of him whenever I see the kitchen poker, all the same." And at this piece of wit the bride elect actually giggled.

She did not giggle often, by-and-by. A few uninterrupted *têtes-à-têtes* with her future husband, a little knowledge of his ways,—so precise and unlike any she had been used to,—soon made her think this marriage might not bring her the graceful ease and happiness she

had expected. But she was very young, and incapable of deep consideration yet. There was enough too, to call her thoughts away from the future in the busy present. Mr. Seton had stipulated for the wedding to be before the family left London; and, as it must be some time, it might as well be at once. So preparations were hurried on, and Mr. Seton proved himself a munificently generous bridegroom.

Yet his magnificent gifts were not prized as were William Somers' inexpensive trifles. They came straight from the shop in many wrappings, were timidly acknowledged, and condescendingly bestowed; while William, who bounded up stairs three or four steps at a time, used to ferret out from amongst numberless letters in his breast pocket a little crushed packet of gloves or scent or ribbon or sweets, for which he bargained how many kisses he was to receive in payment before it was transferred to Susy.

William could not afford jewels and laces; the purchase of that ring and locket embarrassed his slight finances for months—but he showed he was always thinking of Susy, and doing what he could to prove his fealty.

Susy, looking on at this present wooing, hardly knew whether to laugh or cry; however, she did her utmost in Linda's service, and the bride's trousseau was so skilfully and tastily contrived by Susy's dexterous fingers, that even Emily Clayton was obliged to allow it to be admirable, though it only cost £50, and was of home manufacture.

It was surprising how generous all their relations became when it was known Linda was not likely to need their help. The most sensible gave money; the most able gave expensive ornaments. Linda would have divided the latter amongst her sisters, and begged her mother to keep the money to pay for her clothes; but Mr. and Mrs. Shrugg would not allow her to

give up anything; so Linda went to her husband by no means empty-handed. Not that he cared whether she came with anything or nothing, he would perhaps have preferred she should be entirely dependent on him; but he had a sister, a rich, childless widow, and he was not sorry his choice should not appear altogether beggarly in her sarcastic eyes.

The more Mr. Seton saw of his intended wife, the more he admired her. Her clinging love to her twin sister, her childlike dependence on her mother, delighted him in these days of courtship; and he had no doubt that marriage would transfer all this treasury of love from them to himself. But he could not expect others to be entirely of his opinion; and his sister, Mrs. Burnham, who never interfered with him, felt compelled to beg of him to consider before he made so unwise a marriage. Not that Linda's youth and inexperience were such grave faults, as her father's position. But Mrs. Burnham wanted nothing from her rich brother;

and it is amazing how entirely independence begets indifference.' So she went, and sincerely wondered at, and admired her sister-in-law's costly presents, and added to them handsomely. Linda would have no enemy in her husband's sister.

So, not lamb-like, nor saint-like, nor as a heroine, did Linda go to the altar; but just a little flurried and inclined to cry, and with much awe at the ceremony, and some awe of her husband, but with no chilled heart. Of course every one cried at last—friends who knew her little, and relations who didn't know her at all. People are always softest-hearted after a good meal, and when dressed in their best; but her father and mother *alone* feared for her future. Susy still felt severely towards this mercenary sister; for to Bell only, and that under a promise of inviolable secrecy, had Linda told her real motive. But Margaret took Mr. Seton's view of the case, and believed Linda would cling to any one who was kind to

her. Mr. Seton inclined to Margaret more than to any of them, he thought her so steady.

"Her manner is pleasingly gracious," he had said to Linda; and I regret to add, his favourable opinion had been received with derision by Margaret herself.

The twins hardly knew how much they were to each other till they had to part; and then, as the newly-married couple stood to say good-bye, before starting for the honeymoon, the two girls understood the bitterness of separation. No comforting thought was theirs as they kissed each other's wet cheeks again and again; all the pomp and glory of Linda's new position seemed nothing to Bell now; and Linda's heart throbbed with sudden terror as she realized the barrier she had raised between herself and that stronger other self, from whom she had never been parted even for a day. Poor Bella! she went up stairs and took off the finery she had put on so gaily, and abandoned herself to weeping. She

thought she should never be happy again till she saw Linda once more; but the very extreme of youthful sorrow exhausts itself, and that evening she was to appear at a dance given by Miss Clayton—the last dance before leaving London—and it would never do to appear with a red, swollen nose. The three Miss Shruggs, in their bridal dresses, were the belles of Miss Clayton's ball; and Bell, whirling round the room on Mr. Frederick Lington's arm, felt she could be happy even in Linda's absence.

To be sure it was very sad to come home and see Linda's empty bed; but it was very pleasant to fall asleep and dream she stood again in church—this time not as a bridesmaid, but as a bride. How nice it would be if she too settled in London! Emily Clayton might say what she liked about Mr. Lington not being a marrying man; and Margaret might protest against him as a fearful flirt; but inexperienced Bell, just introduced into his delect-

able society, believed only in the beating of her foolish heart, and thought all would happen as she wished when she was back to London on a visit to her sister, though that period was as yet only a vague "some day."

CHAPTER VI.

CLACK.

COUNTRY towns are sometimes picturesque, sometimes interesting from historical association, sometimes of local celebrity on account of their markets, sometimes for their salubrity. Clack was none of these, it was not picturesque, though decidedly irregular; its name was unknown to the Atlas, though it had a pre-Roman existence. It had no market worth the name; and the prevailing wind that swept down its four streets was easterly—north-easterly often, south-easterly occasionally, but never veering sufficiently for Zephyrus to have a turn.

Bradford and Venice alone rivalled the damp and mistiness of autumn in Clack, and Tartary the chill of its winter. Nevertheless, Clack was loved by its inhabitants, and life prospered there. Its one boast was its one church with

its fine old chancel and side chapels; but as no greater bones reposed therein than those of the neighbouring country families—Shruggs, Dales, and Exelbys—few beside grubbing antiquaries came to inspect it; and it was not yet immortalized by photography.

The railroad came no nearer than Nunbriar, five miles off; and Clack affected to be grateful to be spared its closer approach, and the consequent irruption of railway hotels and omnibuses. But Clack was really jealous of Nunbriar's increased trade and population now, as it used to be of its more important market. And the two towns decried each other, and kept all their interest apart, and saw as little of each other as was possible.

Shrugg Park lay between these two towns, but all the Shrugg interest was in Clack; and Mr. Francis Shrugg had in his boyhood looked upon Clack with the same regard as did its inhabitants. Jeremiah Clacker's still-room and parlour were associated in

his memory with delightfully dangerous chemical experiments, and delicious feasts of plum cake and cowslip wine. To him, going back to Clack was going back to the scene of his happy boyhood; and he grew quite merry as, having left the train, they drove towards the damp old town.

The country road was dark and rough, and the omnibus they had hired to convey them all together, rattled and bumped in a manner that completely vanquished Mrs. Shrugg's little remaining strength. To her, the long journey was bringing her to exile in barbarous regions; for brought up in the lovely, blooming county of Kent, and having spent all her maturer life in London, this bleak, unpolished Yorkshire appeared to her much in the same light as did Kamschatka. She was taking all she loved best with her, and yet she felt desolate; for women, like cats, cling tenaciously to locality. These last few miles seemed to her more trying than all the long day's journey

before it, but she said nothing; and neither husband nor children guessed how miserable and worn out she felt as they at last drew up at their destination.

With the utmost eagerness all looked out at this, their future home. The shop was shut, and the side door that opened immediately on their arrival, let out a broad stream of welcome light across the pavement. Another door opened a few yards off, and out of it sprang a little, thin gentleman.

"Ah, Mr. Francis!" he cried, seizing Mr. Shrugg as he got out of the omnibus, "so glad to see you, sir—and your good lady, I presume?" as Mrs. Shrugg followed. "And the young ladies, no doubt? Bless me, sir, you'll be quite a godsend to old Clack. Permit me—permit me," and acting as rapidly as he spoke, he took a parcel from one and a box from another, till he was loaded like a London railway porter.

"Mr. Theodore, my dear," Mr. Shrugg said,

introducing him. "Now come in, come in; it feels cold standing here."

"We're only next door," Mr. Theodore exclaimed, bursting in before them, and marshalling them up a wide, handsome staircase. "When Mr. Clacker died, and we turned out of this, we didn't like to go far away. We have got tea and supper all in one for you. Now isn't this comfortable?"

It was unspeakably comfortable to these cold and tired travellers to find themselves in a large, warm room, bright with a blazing fire, and a white-clothed table well spread with substantial dainties. It was unspeakable comfort too, to be welcomed—though to their own—in this kindly manner. Mr. Theodore wheeled chairs up to the hearth, saw every one seated, and then shook hands all round in a suddenly quiet and formal manner.

"Your servant didn't mention what refreshment you would prefer, ma'am," he said to Mrs. Shrugg; "so we took the liberty of

providing a few little simplicities for yourself and your young ladies;"—here he smiled round on them—"and something more substantial for Mr. Francis. Miss Clacker will have the pleasure of waiting upon you whenever you are ready for the repast. Mrs. Clacker's age, I regret to state, incapacitates her from coming to the front; but she bade me say, she trusts you will some day honour her and her humble dwelling by looking in upon her."

Having made this speech, which he had composed and learnt by heart beforehand, he went off and saw all the luggage properly disposed of; and finally paid the omnibus driver three shillings less than was demanded, assuring Mr. Shrugg that Nunbriar people were cheats and rascals.

In half an hour's time, when they were ready to sit down to table, he re-appeared, carrying a large covered dish, and followed by a lady and a servant carrying others. The lady was of a very remarkable appearance, very tall

and angular, with a broad, sandy face, turn-up nose, small, blue, deep-set eyes, and her red hair arranged in the back and front fashion of forty years ago. She might have been any age between thirty-five and fifty. She wore a black satin spencer, round the waist of which was arranged her gold watch chain; a crimson satin skirt; two large miniature brooches fastened her collar and belt; black lace mittens adorned her hands, and a beaded bag hung from her arm. She said nothing, and looked neither to the right nor left till she had put down her dish and arranged the table to her satisfaction; then she gave Mr. Theodore her hand, and he, leading her up to Mrs. Shrugg, as if they were dancing one of the figures in the Lancers, introduced her thus :—

"Allow me the pleasure of introducing Miss Crocodilla Clacker, an old and valued friend. Mrs. Francis Shrugg, Miss Crocodilla Clacker."

Miss Clacker hereupon released her hand

from his, and taking hold of her gown on each side, she made a swimming curtsey, such as used to be considered the perfection of good deportment by our grandmother's dancing-masters. Mrs. Shrugg, however, shook hands cordially, and expressed her sense of her kindness, etc. But Miss Clacker was too well versed in genteel etiquette, as it was understood in Clack, to take any credit to herself.

What they had done was nothing, she declared. Mr. Francis used to like their Yorkshire tea-cakes, so she had made a few to remind him of old times. Mrs. Clacker had had the roasted leg of mutton kept hot, in case he shouldn't like the goose, as she didn't remember whether goose agreed with him or not. The rashers of hot ham and eggs, and the fried sausages, were little relishes for the young ladies, if they should consider the goose and mutton too gross for genteel appetites; and she hoped the jam turnovers

and curd cheese-cakes would taste nice with a sup of home-made raspberry brandy, before they went to bed. Their condescension in accepting these little things would be greatly appreciated.

As she mentioned each of these good things, Mr. Theodore waved his hand towards the table, as if introducing them also; and when she had finished, he again led her, Lancer fashion, first to Mr. Shrugg, and then to each of the young ladies; going through the same form of introduction with each, as if no one else could hear.

It was a feast sufficient for twenty people; but Miss Clacker and Mr. Theodore feared there was but a scanty supply. They depreciated the great jug of foaming beer, and the fragrant tea and coffee—in true Yorkshire fashion,—as, "doubtless, poor stuff after London." With genuine delicacy, they declined to remain and partake of it with them; and much of the soreness of this coming to

live over a shop, flew away, never to return, owing to their hearty kindness on this weary evening.

"Mamma, who *is* Mr. Theodore?" Nelly asked, when they had gone.

"He lives with old Mrs. Clacker," mamma replied. "He's a relation of the Shruggs;' with which explanation Nelly was satisfied; but Norah and Bell were told further afterwards.

A relay of hot cakes was sent in before the meal was half over, and an inquiry whether a beaf-steak might follow; so fearful were their hospitable purveyors lest the mutton and the goose, the ham and the sausages, were insufficient.

"It doesn't strike me as odd," Mr. Shrugg said; "for I once went to supper with one of my grandfather's tenants,—only three of us sat down; and when he pressed me to a third helping of leg of mutton, he enforced it by assuring me there was another leg

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coming; and it came, too. An old-fashioned Yorkshireman will forgive anything sooner than a lack of appetite at his table."

This old dowager's retreat was a large, well-proportioned house, even without the ground-floor, which was given up to the shop, the parlour, in which the shopman took his meals, the distillery beyond, and the little room beyond again, which was formerly kept for the old squire. The two last-named rooms ran out into a paved court, and faced the kitchens, etc. Beyond these was a large garden, well stocked with fruit and vegetables, and bounded by a narrow lane; a hedge divided it from the Clackers' long strip of garden on the one side, and a high wall, well overgrown with jasmine; and pear-trees shut it in on the other. But for that eye-sore—the shop, with its open centre door, flanked by two small-paned, old-fashioned low windows, full of red and blue and yellow bottles, and leech jars, it would have been no undesirable

dwelling. In the large sitting-room upstairs, overlooking the street, were a beautiful carved ceiling and cornice, the door pieces were miracles of elaborate fruit carving, and the oak chairs and tables—fixtures in the house—were extremely beautiful. The only drawback to these spacious rooms, landing, and stairs, was, how they were to be kept in order by only one servant.

"Of course *we* must help all we can," Norah said, when she and Bell unpacked in their own room; and presently she brought out a little book which she showed with much importance; it was a copy of "The Complete Housemaid," and Bell agreed with her that it would be great fun making their own beds, and forthwith read some advice on the subject of bed-making, with infinite relish.

Susy, who slept in the room underneath, came up to theirs in the morning, wrathful at being disturbed so early, asking what all the bumping was about; and found the two com-

plete housemaids sitting on the floor with a mattress between them, exhausted with laughing at their vain attempts to put the heavy bedding back again.

Later, when Mr. Shrugg came down, he was surprised to hear both Susy's and Margaret's voices raised in decided anger; and entering the sitting-room, he found these young ladies administering no gentle scolding to their three younger sisters who, having retreated to the further side of the room, were vainly trying to excuse themselves. After one glance, Mr. Shrugg, comprehending what it meant, sat down and laughed till the tears rolled down his face.

There stood Norah, the ringleader, of course, with a bottle in one hand and a black-leading brush in the other, as if she had been cleaning a grate; and on her cheek, and the large coarse apron which was part of her equipment as housemaid, were long streaks of black. Bell, in a pretty clean cotton gown, had just put down

a scuttle full of coals; and poor little Nelly held a large dirty duster, and looked as if her share of the work had been very heavy.

"Look at these three, papa," cried Margaret, majestically severe; "of course they must disgrace us all by their ridiculous conduct. Fancy Miss Norah taking upon herself to order the new servant to leave this room for them to clean. There's Nelly, nearly in a fever with rubbing furniture; and I hope Bell's arm will ache all day; as for Norah—"

"And they nearly came through my ceiling before it was light," Susy interposed; but her father's mirth was redoubled on hearing this, and Susy was obliged to end in laughing with him.

But after that morning, the three would-be complete housemaids never attempted any but the highest order of housework, such as dusting and mending; for their mother took Margaret's view of their conduct, and lectured them well on the subject of misdirected energy.

To Norah, her father gave the care of his room,—that little room downstairs which had been his grandfather's sanctum, and where the escritoire that had once held the old man's books and papers was now to hold his grandson's. Mr. Theodore came in to give up the keys of the cupboards in that room. "Mr. Clacker never used them," he explained; "he respected the old gentleman's memory so much. Nothing's been moved except the still; and that got rusty from damp, and was set up in the shop."

"I see the old books," answered Mr. Francis Shrugg, "which I remember he taught me from. Norah, you may take this discoloured paper away, but don't disturb the little drawers. I shan't use them, and I like them to remain as he left them. I suppose," he added to Mr. Theodore, "I suppose Robert Shrugg looked over everything here?"

"No;" and Mr. Theodore looked away as he spoke. "He didn't come here. You see, the

old gentleman only kept his chemicals here, and all in this house was left to you after Mr. Clacker; so there was no occasion to disturb anything."

When Mr. Shrugg was left to himself, he opened each little drawer that he had forbidden Norah to disturb, and tenderly looked at the yellowing papers they contained,—mostly notes of experiments, and recipes in the old man's old writing; and then with a sigh he shut them up, and thought how little he had once expected to be indebted to his ironical legacy for his daily bread. This sad musing was broken by the entrance of a gentleman.

"Good day, sir," said the new comer, advancing into the room as if sure of a welcome; "glad to see you safe at Clack; hope you'll like it. My name's Murkitroyd—Peter Murkitroyd, junior partner with old Wright Sawbones." So saying, he shook hands, and seated himself opposite Mr. Shrugg.

He was a very good-looking young man, with

merry dark eyes, abundance of brown curly hair, and a sturdy middle-sized figure; and though he had a decided dash of the country dialect in his pronunciation, and was not a bit polished-looking, he was yet by no means vulgar.

A sudden alarm seized Mr. Shrugg, as he noted his good looks—an unaccountable dread of he knew not what; and he did not respond so cordially as was his wont. Mr. Murkitroyd evidently felt himself unwelcome, for he said his friend Theodore had told him he might call.

"I don't expect to see the ladies," he added; "I suppose they're busy enough settling down. I hear you've got no end of daughters—what a pity they're not sons."

"I don't agree with you, sir!" and the tone marked some displeasure.

"No?" Mr. Murkitroyd explained: "Well, of course I mean in a business point of view. Women are so helpless; and what can your

young ladies do here with their London bringing up?"

Mr. Shrugg was not going to discuss that subject with him, and 'mentally set him down as an impertinent busybody.' Mr. Murkitroyd, receiving no answer to this, tried another subject.

"Wright is coming in state. I suppose you know him, he's been here forty-five years, he tells me. He's getting very shaky, I wish he'd be content to be a sleeping partner; I wonder he hasn't bled every one to death before now. I came first to ask you not to take our custom; it isn't worth much, for we do nearly everything in our own shop. Wright will offer it to you because you're a Shrugg; but there's that poor Edwards, with a lot of sickly children and a good-for-nothing, lazy wife; he's sure of some trade so long as we deal with him; but without us he'd go smash in no time. You don't misunderstand me, I hope?"

Mr. Shrugg was roused to interest, both in the subject and the speaker. He said—

"What! Edwards likely to go smash? Why, his father had all the business in the neighbourhood in my time, and had the smartest shop in the place. How is that?"

"Old Shrugg, the old squire, took up Clacker and cracked him off to every one. I only know these things by hearsay, you know; but in three years one picks up plenty, especially if one knows the Clackers," he added with a laugh; "and I'm told Edwards went down surely from the time your grandfather set up Clacker. I don't suppose he sells anything but pills and penn'orths of oil now."

Mr. Shrugg readily promised to refuse the custom, and felt more kindly towards his visitor for his honesty. As he was going away, the window was suddenly darkened, and three or four pretty faces were pressed against it from the outside.

"Can't you come and look at the garden, papa?" cried some one.

And Mr. Murkitroyd went away, feeling

less sure that sons were better than daughters, especially pretty daughters like these.

All day and every day Mrs. Clacker sat behind the wire blind in her little parlour window "to see t' stirrings," as she phrased it. All her life her great aim had been to see what was going on; and now in her old age she wanted nothing more than to see that uninterruptedly. Very little was there to see in Clack High Street; but it represented her world, and afforded her and her daughter ample matter for amusement and study. They knew the history of every man, woman, and child who passed, and of most of the animals too; and indeed they regarded with suspicion any they did not know. Mrs. Clacker had never had any claim to public regard on her own account, but Jeremiah, her husband, had; and as his widow, and also because old age invests every one with a certain dignity and interest, she received attention and kindness, not only from those in her own class, but from those who were considered the *élite*

of Clack. Her daughter had what she called, "'igh haspiration," and worked as hard as the curate did in the parish, but she never neglected her home and her mother; and she considered Mr. Theodore to be the embodiment of wit and learning, and Mr. Murkitroyd the personification of manly grace and beauty. Miss Crocodilla was just wise enough to enjoy her position,—and that is the highest bliss and truest philosophy attainable.

Did any question arise respecting events in the long past, it was only necessary to refer to the Clackers to get at the right at once. In the dullest place, events—even startling and romantic events—do happen if you give them time enough; and Clack and its neighbourhood had furnished many interesting memories within the last fifty years. The greatest was of course that which concerned themselves and their connection with the Shruggs. To Mrs. and Miss Clacker the Queen was a great personage; but her greatness was vague and distant

compared to that of the Shruggs. At any rate, no monarch could be more despotic, nor receive deeper reverence from his courtiers than the old squire exacted and received from his tenants. His honour was theirs also; his state shed a genial ray on them; and his history,—past, present and future,—was as a golden thread permeating their histories also.

Only they who have lived in a small, remote town, can understand this intense interest in the squire's concerns, which is neither servile nor vulgar, simply because it is genuine.

Old Shrugg took an interest in Jeremiah Clacker, as we have seen, because it was in the latter's arms his eldest son died; but this interest deepened into personal liking as years went on, till at last circumstances made him take the chemist into fullest confidence; for when his grandson, Robert, refused to acknowledge his wife's youngest born, it was to Jeremiah's care the unfortunate little Theodore was given; and it was from Mr. and Mrs.

Clacker the poor child received the only affection he ever knew.

When Mrs. Robert Shrugg's guilt was discovered, she protested her innocence of anything worse than foolish coquetry, and called upon God to strike her blind if she lied; but appearances were strong against her. The husband took her children from her, refused ever to see or speak to her again, and only stopped short of being divorced from her, for the sake of his eldest son and daughter. Her grandfather permitted her to remain on his estate, though not at the great house; and there she continued to live after his death: a little bit of spite on her part against her husband, who she knew would neither turn her out, nor be able to enjoy the park as long as she remained there.

Perhaps the old man had not believed in her entire guilt, for he left a modest maintenance to the poor boy; and so Mr. Theodore—who never called himself Shrugg if he could

help it—was independent of his reputed father. Latterly, he and his mother often met, but he never spoke of his visits to her; and she, as if resenting on him the disgrace on her own fair fame, laughed at his oddity, and cared nothing for his affection. Indeed, all her love and interest was centred in Robin, her first-born. All her life long she never ceased to protest her innocence; but friends had deserted her, and 'her own relations kept up with her only by letter.' 'In her first wild disclaimer of her guilt—that fierce curse she had invoked upon herself, if she were guilty—those who remembered it, saw proof positive of her sin; for year by year her bright, dark eyes had dimmed, and now she walked gropingly, and gazed without speculation in her gaze. Constant weeping and bad health might, in any other person, be reason enough for prematurely decaying sight; but in Mrs. Robert Shrugg it seemed as the hand of God carrying out her self-chosen punishment.

So while Robin Shrugg, the one son, was heir to a good estate, educated at Eton and Oxford, and now an officer in a crack regiment, enjoying life as fortune's favourites enjoy it; the other had to struggle against ignominy and distrust, owned by none, and bearing his very name on sufferance only. None but a kindly heart could have struggled successfully against so much; but Theodore's faults were those of education, his virtues were innate.

His father's friends and equals passed him with a condescending nod and a civil word, as they would pass Clacker or any Clackite—they never dreamed of asking him to their houses, nor treating him as an equal; but in Clack and by Clack, Mr. Theodore was a Shrugg—a fallen Shrugg, perhaps, but that gave him a claim to their pity as well as to their respect; and in Clack his company and influence were courted and acknowledged as that of a superior being. Not even the much-

admired surgeon, Mr. Murkitroyd, could cut out Mr. Theodore in the good graces of the Clack ladies! Mr. Murkitroyd was undeniably better looking; but he never paid compliments, never quoted poetry, laughed at sentiment, and openly ridiculed tea parties; nevertheless, he was prized too by Clack society; indeed, Clack prided itself on its two beaux.

"Have you seen Dr. Murkitroyd yet?" was almost the first question Miss Clacker asked when Susy and Margaret Shrugg called to see the old lady to thank her for her hospitality of the previous evening; and finding they had not had that pleasure, she proceeded to enlighten them concerning his family: telling how his father was a wealthy Leeds manufacturer, and his only brother "rather gay;" how the young doctor had no need to work for his living, but had had words with his father about the factory hands, whose treatment the young man wished to better; so they had parted in

anger, and never met since. "It's a shame, to be sure," she added; "such a fine gentleman as he is; but mebbe it 'll all come right. T' brother's sowing his wild oats too fast to last; t' old gentleman 'll be sorry he got rid of t'steady one soon, I'll be bound; 'tisn't often one could see two such genteel gentlemen as Dr. Murkitroyd and our Mr. Theodore."

"Come, come," cried the old lady, who had hitherto done nothing but smile and nod at her visitors; "what are you magging about, Crocky? I'm very hungry, isn't it most tea time? Have we had our dinner?"

Poor Mrs. Clacker's faculties had decayed so gradually that her daughter did not yet realize they were gone so far. When the old lady gave up walking, even into her own little garden, it was because of the damp; and although these little walks were not resumed in the fine, dry, summer days, it occasioned her no concern. Then the knitting was set aside, but only because mother had cold in her

eyes. So imperceptibly each little employment was given up, until the only movement was from her bed to the easy chair, between the fire and the window; and Crocky—like Martha, busied about many things,—had hardly noticed how the decay of the mind had kept pace with the decay of the body; her mother's remarks did not appear odd to her yet.

"Mother's so hearty," she exclaimed; "it's a blessing to see her enjoy her meals. Why, mother, we don't have tea till five you know, and *that's* early-like. It'll be six before you have tea in London?" she added to the young ladies.

"Ay, ay," cried Mrs. Clacker, who was not to be silenced in that way; "but we must 'ev it earlier for t' young ladies. Fine manners it would be to keep 'em without anything to eat. Who did you say they was?"

"T' Miss Shruggs, mother."

"Ay, t' Miss Shroogs, and famous beauties they always was. Yer father came in this

morning—he's a fine young man, very; but he shouldn't have married and cut himself out, should he? Ey, deary me, it is a pity he let Mr. Robert turn the old man round his finger! You 've come to tea, I hope."

It was in vain they protested they could not stay. Mrs. Clacker looked so grieved and pressed so hard that they consented at last to have just one cup; and as they were all sitting down to table, in came Mr. Theodore and Mr. Murkitroyd.

Mr. Theodore was in ecstasies.

"I have come in for an unexpected feast," he cried admiringly, as he shook hands with the sisters.

"Nay," Mrs. Clacker exclaimed, "I' sure it's no feast; Crocky's getting stingy, she is; she wanted me to go without my tea."

"I meant a feast for the visual organs," said Mr. Theodore, gallantly,—"roses and lilies and daffydowndillies."

"Don't he talk like a valentine?" Crocky

said. "Mr. Murkitroyd, you'll have some tea, sir?"

But Mr. Murkitroyd would neither have tea, nor a seat; he stood up, leaning against the chimney-piece, grinning at his friend's broad compliment, and glancing at the two girls, who were doing their utmost to avoid being stuffed by Miss Clacker. Very shy both Susy and Margaret felt in this unaccustomed society, and very unlike London young ladies, Mr. Murkitroyd thought them.

"What, not a sup o' tea?" Mrs. Clacker cried. "Come, take a sup to night; it's a poor heart that never rejoices. Yon's Miss Shroogs, sir; perhaps you'd like to drink their health in something better than tea—a drop o' rum, now?"

"Well said!" cried Mr. Theodore; "tea is not the liquid to drink to beauty in. Certainly not. What will you have, doctor?"

"Nothing. I'm going home to dinner, and would rather not spoil my appetite."

"Dinner!" said the old lady, catching at the word; "ay, we haven't had our dinner, have we? Crocky, you're getting stingy."

Crocodilla handed her a large piece of hot buttered plum cake, and so satisfied her for the time. And then, after drinking the health of the two girls present, and of the whole family, Mr. Theodore led the conversation to what he supposed were more agreeable topics—dress and fashion.

"What is the favourite tint for ladies' dresses now?" he inquired with an air of deep interest.

Susy said solemnly that blue was the favourite during the season.

"Ah!" Mr. Theodore continued, "blue is the prettiest colour of all. I always go and inspect the bonnets in Regent Street—marvels of elegance, to be sure. Now, do the royal family go and shop for themselves ever?"

Susy couldn't answer this important question.

"One walk down Regent Street," Mr.

Theodore added, "is as invigorating to the mind as a glowing dip in the restless ocean is to the body. One's senses are too much steeped in rank and luxury, perhaps; but they are also inflamed and stimulated by the arts and sciences strewn around. I love little Clack, but I respect London as the mighty emporium of skill and beauty. London, thy stones are veined with gold!"

"I wish they were," cried the doctor. "Who's, your poet, Theodore? Moses?"

"Ah, now, sir!" Crocodilla cried. "You are always so funny. Mr. Theodore writes beautiful poetry; you know he does, sir."

Susy's eyes, flooded with suppressed laughter, met Mr. Murkitroyd's, and Mr. Murkitroyd, suddenly wishing to appear very amiable, came to the table and asked for some tea.

"So he goes to look at the bonnets, Miss Crocky," he said, taking a cup from her. "I suppose he buys yours for you?"

"He was good enough to present me with

one, sir, but I never dare wear it, lest folk should think me extravagant. It was a beauty, indeed."

Mr. Theodore, smiled and said,—

"Naughty Miss Clacker, to despise my little offering. Well, I allow it was a very chaste article. May I ask, do you deal at Madame Tromages, Miss Shrugg?"

"No;" Margaret answered, before Susy could speak, "We always make our own bonnets."

"Bravo," cried Mr. Theodore. "Ah, you 'll set the fashions here. And how is your married sister, the young bride, Mrs. Polkely Seton, of Hyde Park Gardens?"

Margaret was not eager to answer this; she kept her cup to her lips, and so obliged Susy to answer; and Susy's eyes became brighter than ever.

Mr. Murkitroyd remained when they went away. Both the girls blushed when the old lady asked him, as they bade her good-bye, if

they were not real beauties; but Margaret held her head erect, and looked at him as if she dared him to pay her a compliment. It was rather embarrassing to the young man, and he waived the question entirely. Mr. Theodore escorted them to their own door, and was enchanted when Miss Crocky, on his return, called him a great flirt.

"Now, Crocky!" he replied exultingly,—he never called her Crocky before strangers; familiarity not being strict etiquette in Clack society. "I'm sure I'm not a flirt; but really if any woman could inspire me with a desire to do so, it would be Miss Margaret, the pearl of pearls. Isn't she sublime, doctor?"

"I admire the other,—her face is very sweet."

"Ah, doctor!" the old lady exclaimed, "you're caught, I should'nt wonder. Well, make haste, for I'd like a bit o' yer bridecake, and the funeral cake seems nearest, though I shan't be here for that, more's t' pity."

"*My* bridecake," he laughed. "You'll taste

his first," pointing to Theodore; "no one 'll have me. 'I can't spout poetry as he does,' you know."

"Never mind, sir," Miss Crocky said, consolingly, "we've diversities of gifts, as St. Paul says. But *I* admire Miss Shrugg the most too. They'll cut out Miss Wright, I'm thinking."

"Miss Wright!" echoed Mr. Murkitroyd, disdainfully; "give us a candle, please; I can't see Theodore; and I know he's blushing at Miss Wright being mentioned."

"No," said Theodore, lighting a candle, while Miss Clacker drew down the window-blind; for the short day had given place to night. "No one can call me a flirt; can they, ma'am?"

"Eh!" the old lady exclaimed. "Nay, stop to supper," for Mr. Murkitroyd had risen to go; "it won't be long before it's ready."

Mr. Murkitroyd turned with a laugh, and snuffed the candle. Whereupon Miss Crocky uttered an alarmed little shriek.

"Oh, sir!" she cried, "there was a shroud!"

"Ah! I noticed it, but wouldn't say anything," said Theodore.

"Lord, ha' mercy upon us!" added Mrs. Clacker; piously; "Eh, deary me!—you shouldn't have melled with it, sir."

"Bah!" Mr. Murkitroyd exclaimed.

"I've never seen such a well-formed one in any candle since before poor father died," Miss Crocky said. "It was in t' candle by his bed, and he pointed to it,—you recollect, mother?"

"Yes, yes; I recollect. We'd got him a famous sup of jelly that night, and he couldn't touch it; you made me sup it instead, you know. Crocky, I recollect it *was* good."

"You shouldn't have touched it, sir," Crocky went on, in unfeigned concern; "but we must all go," she added, resignedly.

"I must," he said; "so good-night to you all."

When Mr. Murkitroyd reached his solitary

home, he sat down in unwonted thought. The room looked bare and dark. How often he had congratulated himself on this solitary home! how often hugged the feeling of independence and self-reliance! but this evening all the brightness of a happy family life seemed suddenly to be temptingly present with him as it had never before appeared. Only that morning he had pictured Mr. Shrugg as an object of sincerest pity, hampered with a throng of fanciful, useless girls, and careworn with petty worries arising therefrom. Now Mr. Shrugg stood transformed into an enviable, happy father; and Mr. Murkitroyd's imagination brightened with the mental vision of the old room over the shop full of merry, pretty girls, lightening their parents' cares, and filling the house with sunshine. Straight from one extreme to the other went his wayward fancy; and paramount among the bright faces, his imagination conjured up rosy Susy's—sweet Susy Shrugg's. He laughed at his folly in letting his thoughts

run on; nevertheless, he did not restrain them, and so, as befalls all other idle thinkers, he laid up for himself a plentiful crop of disappointment.

CHAPTER VII.

A BITTER LIFE.

By the end of the week, Norah knew the names and histories of nearly every one in Clack, being indebted to Miss Clacker for the information; and she would repeat all to her sisters, with such an exact imitation of Crocodilla's manner, that no one would imagine, who heard their frequent peals of laughter, that they had lately had a fall in the world. Bell imitated Mr. Theodore just as exactly, and the two were for ever inventing new scenes and dialogues for the display of their powers of mimicry.

Mr. Murkitroyd had called and seen the whole family—a very quiet, demure set of young ladies they seemed during that first visit; but no one else had been, it not being

etiquette for Clackites to call until the new comers had shown themselves in church.

This matter of who should visit them, and who should not, was meantime a subject of much doubt and anxiety. The chief tradespeople were rather afraid of venturing to take the liberty; and the professionals hardly liked opening their ranks to trade. Miss Wright, the surgeon's granddaughter, lately home from a finishing school in York, had neither doubt nor scruple. "Poor things!" she said, with kindly patronage; "I am sure I will do my best to reconcile them. I was longing for some companions; they can't help living over a shop, I am sure; I don't mind visiting there if they are nice girls." Mr. Murkitroyd, in whose presence she said this, smiled a peculiar smile, but made no remark; while others of Miss Wright's friends complimented her on her goodness.

"To be sure they are Shruggs," said Mrs. Clark, the lawyer's wife; "but Mrs. Francis

isn't a Yorkshirewoman, and hadn't any fortune. We must be careful about her, you know; south country people are generally poor, weak, silly creatures. I shan't make up my mind to call till I've had a look at them. I wonder if the Dales will notice them on Sunday."

"*Mr.* Dale must, I should say," said the Wesleyan parson's wife; "for he and Mr. Francis were almost brought up together; but you can't expect *Mrs.* Dale to,—eh? I almost wish I was a churchwoman, just to see all next Sunday."

Miss Wright, who on account of her liberal education was considered rather an authority on points of etiquette, here smilingly interposed. "Oh, yes!" she said; "Mrs. Dale will very likely be introduced, and will bow to them all kindly; but of course she won't have them at The Chase, nor shake hands when she meets them; she'll behave to them as you and I behave to our tradesfolks' wives,—with affability; nothing more."

"There's that young John Dale," the lawyer's wife continued: "they say he's very fond of a pretty face. They'd better mind, *he* doesn't get over friendly."

Again Miss Wright smiled, "Mr. John Dale must be well accustomed to pretty faces," she exclaimed. "I shouldn't think any of these *are* pretty, either,—London girls seldom are. You've seen them," she added, turning to Mr. Murkitroyd; "are they nice looking?"

Mr. Murkitroyd's eyes always seemed to acquire a mischievous expression when he looked at Miss Wright; and now they had a very roguish twinkle. "Are they pretty?" he said. "Well, I shouldn't call them pretty, exactly."

Miss Wright shook her curls in triumph. "Ah!" she exclaimed. "I thought I was right; London girls always look washed out and sickly, but our Yorkshire air will improve them. I'm sure I hope so, poor things!"

Totally unconscious of this sensation, the

Shrugg family went to church to be stared at furtively by the *élite*, and gazed at openly by the vulgar.

Mr. Theodore was in a narrow pew, immediately behind the large, high, square pew belonging to the old dower house; and when his connections entered, he stood up beaming with smiles to usher them in, as it were. A delicious odour of lavender water was wafted from him; and he dropped a packet of lozenges over for the young ladies' refreshment during the service. He was on the alert too to see if they had the right hymn; and every now and then he looked across the aisle to where Mr. Murkitroyd sat—and it was an unusual circumstance for that gentleman to go to morning service—with a triumphant air, as if to challenge his opinion of the fair sisterhood kneeling before him. Good Mr. Church, reverently praying in the reading-desk, might have been altogether silent for any attention given by the majority of the congregation

to his words; and to confess the truth, he too was a little distracted by the well-filled pew beneath him.

The Dales, Exelbys, and the Shruggs of Shrugg Park, sat in the chancel above the mouldering bones of their ancestors. The Shruggs' pew was tenanted only by one lady, a white-haired, tall, elegant woman, with large black eyes ever moving restlessly around her; this was Mrs. Robert Shrugg. She drove into Clack with a page by her side, and a mounted groom following her low phaeton. Holding the boy's shoulder, she walked proudly through the church to her seat—taking no notice of any one, though her eyes seemed to regard all. Mr. Theodore's little fair face glowed as she passed him, and he ran his fingers nervously through his scanty light whiskers. At the pew wherein the Francis Shruggs sat, she almost stopped, and Mr. Francis half rose; but she went quickly on to her accustomed seat without any further token of recognition. After service, most of

the *élite* of the town found an excuse for loitering in the churchyard; Miss Wright and the lawyer's wife were more especially anxious to watch the new arrivals out.

Alas for Miss Wright's patronage! She saw with amazement Mrs. Dale—*Mrs.*, not Mr., stand—absolutely stand aside at the porch, instead of hastening to her carriage as usual, and the moment Mrs. Francis Shrugg came out, rush forward and seize her hand; then such a greeting passed between them as only old friends long parted give each other; and meantime old Mr. Dale and young Mr. Dale were smiling and bowing amongst the young ladies.

In the background, a little distance apart from the stream of the outgoing congregation, stood Mrs. Robert, leaning on her page. Alas for Clack patronage! The chief tradespeople's doubts were at once and for ever quelled; and even Miss Wright, who had been educated at York, began to fear she had been a little premature in expressing her opinion. The fact is,

Mrs. Dale and Mrs. Francis Shrugg had met years ago when unmarried girls, and had conceived a great affection for each other. Since then, circumstances had prevented them meeting again, and the correspondence had ceased when Mrs. Dale married her first husband and went to India. Until Mrs. Dale recognised her old friend in Clack Church as the wife of the man she had so much pitied, she had no idea of what had become of pretty Susan Greville. "But if I'd seen your daughter accidentally," cried lively Mrs. Dale, pointing to Susy, "I should have gone up to her. She's your living image."

The greeting between the husbands was as warm. "But for all these youngsters," Mr. Dale cried, "I could fancy you and I were Frank and Johnny again. Shrugg, do you remember how we used to dodge behind the others here, and make appointments for the next meet, eh? Jolly days those, eh? Not many horses up to our weight now across

country? And you've no boys, I hear. Well, I've only one, and he is quite enough." And then he winked at his old friend, and glanced admiringly at his son, who was successfully imitating his parents in cordiality to the new arrivals.

"You'll come and see us to-morrow or next day," Mrs. Dale said, as they walked all together across the churchyard to the carriage.

"No," Mrs. Francis answered; "we've no carriage, and we've put ourselves out of the pale of our own set. It's all altered now, Gertrude."

"What nonsense!" Mrs. Dale cried. "Ah, never mind, I'll come and see you first, then; but I could never stand humbug you know. Mr. Shrugg, you'll all come over to us, won't you, if we send the carriage?"

"I think not," he replied, gravely. "We have accepted our present position."

"Did you ever hear such folks?" Mrs. Dale cried to her husband. "They're already so

enamoured of Clack, I suppose, that they won't know us poor country people. Why, Susan, don't you care to renew our old friendship?"

"That is an unfair way of putting it, Gertrude," Mrs. Francis Shrugg exclaimed.

Mrs. Dale suddenly took her hand. "Ah! my dear Susan," she said; "I do understand all about it. But you musn't fancy real regard flies when misfortune comes; besides," she added, with a quick change again to her usual lively manner, "you're folks of landed property yet, you know."

The Dales had hardly driven away from the gates of the churchyard, and the Shruggs were just moving on, when a page boy darted forward to stop Mr. Francis.

"Mrs. Shrugg wants you, please, sir," he said.

Mr. Francis stood irresolute; then seeing the helpless figure all alone, and remembering how she must have been waiting within hearing of all their hearty greetings, he followed the boy back to his mistress.

"I knew you'd come, Francis," Mrs. Shrugg said, stretching out both her hands. "I can just see you. I want to tell you I'm so sorry for you, and you know I'm not soft-hearted. Ah! how well you look; how young too; and hardly grey yet. Look at me and *my* white hairs."

"Black hair always turns soon," Mr. Francis said; indeed he hardly knew what to say.

"Does it?" she said with a hard laugh. "But tears and trouble are quicker bleachers than age, I tell you. I'm so glad you've come to live near me. You'll come and see me?"

"Yes, indeed I will."

"And bring your wife?"

He hesitated, and her eyes looked searchingly into his.

"I won't contaminate her," she said, laughing again. "I do have virtuous people in my house sometimes. Nay, Francis, *do* bring her. You don't know how I long to talk to a good woman sometimes; I mean one that will talk

like a friend, not as a superior being. I know your wife must be nice, but I didn't like to call till I spoke to you."

Mr. Francis could not resist this, and he promised.

"When I thought of her as I last saw her," he said, on relating this to his wife, "one of the handsomest and merriest girls imaginable—admired by every one, and adored by Robert—I could not seem unkind, she is such a fearful wreck. But what about the girls?"

"Poor creature!" Mrs. Francis said, contrasting her own fate with Mrs. Shrugg's. "Well, it won't hurt the girls to see her there; she's more likely to do them good as a terrible warning, than harm."

As they walked home, round the other side of the churchyard, they saw Mr. Theodore go round to his mother. He had evidently been waiting till she was ready to start, and put her carefully into her little carriage. She gave him a careless nod as she drove off, and he

raised his hat, and stood watching till the phaeton was out of sight.

"That's a good fellow," Mr. Shrugg said, after viewing this little scene. And the young ladies spoke kindly of him too; but perhaps the lavender lozenges had softened their hearts towards him; or, perhaps, their new acquaintances, the Dales, had inclined them to think well of every one just then. It certainly had a good effect on their mother. Mrs. Francis at once felt an interest in the place, and she became almost light-hearted as she recounted how she first met Gertrude Hamilton, and how great their friendship was until the latter left England.

"How little I ever expected to meet her again!" she said; adding a little moral reflection to this effect,—We are often closest to happiness when we seem to have left it far behind.

"Thank you for nothing," said her husband, but he smiled as he said it. They understood

each other too well to make troubles out of trifles.

Mrs. Dale was as good as her word. The great carriage stood in the little street for more than an hour, while its mistress sat over the chemist's shop combating Mrs. Shrugg's scruples, and all Clack had ample opportunity to note how long the visit lasted; and Mrs. Dale triumphed at last.

"With such pretty daughters, Susan," she argued, "you cannot follow your inclinations. You must let them have society, and I suppose you don't wish them to marry shopmen! Very well, then, they must come to me and see men of their own standing, my dear. It's all nonsense to say, as I know you will say if I let you, they don't want husbands at all. I tell you they do want husbands to take care of them, and to put them back into their proper place in the world. Of course I don't advocate husband-hunting and manœuvring, but it is every parent's duty to see their daughters

have suitable chances; and depend upon it, if people took proper care in this matter, there would be fewer disappointments."

"What a pity you have no girls!" laughed her friend.

"I find I've enough to do with Johnny," she replied; "however I hope he'll soon be settled. I've meant Gracey Exelby for him ever since they were children, and I believe they will soon understand each other—indeed, I think they do already."

Now Mrs. Dale had a twofold reason for saying this, for Mr. Johnny had no serious idea of taking unto himself a wife at that time; but as Grace Exelby was often at his home, and was an old playmate, he certainly liked flirting with her, as he liked flirting under all circumstances; and his mother hoped he would eventually marry her, but was too wise a woman to press the point home prematurely. Grace Exelby, would be in most respects a very suitable daughter-in-law, as daughters-in-law

go, and if these very pretty Miss Shruggs were made to believe the matter was settled, they might be admitted into sensitive Johnny's company with impunity. So Mrs. Dale said little, and inferred much; but she adroitly managed to let Mr. and Mrs. Shrugg consider the young man as already engaged, and on this consideration their scruples about allowing their daughters to accept Mr. Dale's invitation to The Chase vanished.

In a very short time Mrs. Dale found she could go nowhere without one of her pretty young friends to keep her company; and no party at The Chase was complete unless they were there to sing and play. To be sure they took the shine out of Grace Exelby, but Johnny didn't seem to see it; and his lively mother gained so much by her new acquaintances that she soon ceased to fear on his account.

Mr. and Mrs. Shrugg resolutely declined sharing in these gaieties; and as Mr. Dale could

not induce his old friend to visit him, he was all the more bent on showing kindness to his old friend's children. Margaret was his favourite: he termed her a very Diana; and because his son persisted in saying she was too cold, he termed him a senseless boy. Mr. Dale did not rest till he had mounted Margaret, and shown her off with his harriers. His wife was a fearless horsewoman, and she liked to astonish Margaret, who did not take naturally to leaping hedges and ditches; but Margaret dearly loved to be on horseback, and was by no means unconscious of the good effect of her supple figure as displayed in the close-fitting habit.

Young Exelby dashed up to young Dale the first time Margaret appeared in the field, to inquire who she was; and after he was introduced, he kept by her side all day, greatly to Mrs. Dale's delight.

"She's a regular out and outer," was Mr. Exelby's verdict to his friend Johnny, as the two young men followed slowly through the

narrow lane after the sport was over; and Johnny, looking critically at the graceful shoulders and trim waist, the glowing cheeks, and eyes brilliantly distended with the quick ride through the bracing air, agreed with him.

Yes, his father was right, she was a very Diana; but Johnny got on better with Susy and Bell than with Margaret, at first. Margaret was a little bit disdainful in her opinion.

"He's spoilt," she said; "if he hadn't been an only son, he'd have very likely been delightful. But his mother spoils him; and that little idiot, Grace Exelby, spoils him too."

"But he's so handsome," said Bell. "Doesn't he remind you of Frederick Lington?"

"Frederick Lington!" cried Margaret. "No, indeed; he's very much nicer than that flirt, Frederick Lington."

Bell gave a little sigh.

"Well, I don't wonder Miss Exelby adores him," she continued. "She ought to be proud of such a lover."

Margaret laughed. "You silly child," she said, with all the dignity of superior age and experience; "it would do Mr. Johnny all the good in the world if Grace Exelby gave him a snubbing occasionally; I would if I were in her place."

"No, you wouldn't, if you loved him," Susy exclaimed. "I don't believe you'll ever love any one, Margaret."

"Much you know about it," Margaret replied; "at all events, I wouldn't make love in public, as Grace Exelby does. I suppose you love Willy, but you never spooned in public."

And straightway over Susy's fair face came a flush of rosiest light. Margaret's abrupt words recalled sweet stolen looks "across the crowd," adoring glances, that innocent Susy was almost ashamed to recollect; tender words whispered on crowded stairs, lingering kisses so sweet and rare in that busy family life, where each of the sisterhood thought she had as much right to Willy's companionship as Susy herself.

"Well," said Susy, trying to speak as if her heart was not full to overflowing with all these memories, "at all events, I think it would not be very becoming for Miss Exelby to snub the man she is to marry. But *you* can't understand, Margaret."

The three girls were walking towards The Chase as they thus talked. That road had become their favourite; chiefly, they said, because they could reach it from their back gate without encountering the High Street eyes and comments; and here another beau presented himself for criticism. It was Mr. Murkitroyd, mounted on a very handsome horse, which, like its rider, was splashed from head to foot with mud.

"Luckily I had a patient in the direction of the meet," he exclaimed, reining up before the young ladies; "so I got a run. We went all round Nunbriar Moor, and we killed in the station. Famous run it was."

"Do you always have a patient near the

meet on hunting mornings?" Susy demurely asked.

"Always," he replied. "I find a good gallop steadies my nerves."

He smiled pleasantly, showing a handsome set of white teeth. Susy smiled back at him. She liked his honest manner, and feeling safe herself, never dreamed how every kindly word she uttered fell like sweet music on his ears. "Being engaged is just as good as being married," she often said. "One can enjoy a conversation with an unmarried man without remark." But poor Mr. Murkitroyd had not yet heard of her engagement; and blindly, with a little pardonable vanity, he believed Susy would by-and-by hear his love-suit with pleasure.

By-and-by, when he saw his way plain before him to furnish a comfortable little house, and to prove to her father he could afford to keep a wife. As for his own father, his consent was unnecessary; nor was the old man

likely to give it, if asked. His brother, Jonas, might marry to please him if he liked—and here, the surgeon smiled grimly at the idea of Jonas doing anything to please any one but himself. Thus he rode away from the young ladies, with happy, hopeful thoughts—smiling, gay, and *debonnaire*.

"I wonder if we've got accustomed to him," Margaret said when he was out of hearing; "but he certainly doesn't seem half so awkward and disagreeable now as he did at first."

"I like him," said Susy, "because he's so ready to help papa about the drugs. There's something about him when he smiles that reminds me of Willy."

"O Susy!" cried Bell; "Willie's far better looking, and more gentlemanly."

"Of course he is," Susy exclaimed. "Of course Willy *is* a gentleman, and I don't think Mr. Murkitroyd is quite; but still there's just a little likeness."

(Poor Mr. Murkitroyd nursing his happy thoughts!)

"Now let us turn," Margaret said as they reached the two miles stone at the cross roads. "We shan't meet Mrs. Dale to-day; she's sure to have gone out with the hounds; and it's very dull."

So they turned to retrace their steps, but suddenly stopped at the sound of a galloping horse. Here it came tearing along the Nunbriar cross-road, dragging an overturned dog-cart behind it, rushing towards them impetuously, swerving from side to side so viciously that the three girls took instant fright and darted up a bank to take refuge in a hedge. On came the horse, turned the corner towards The Chase, caught his fore foot in a projecting root of a wayside tree, and fell heavily to the ground. In a few seconds a man came running after it—a little, fair-haired gentleman, without a hat—evidently the driver, for he carried a long whip; and as he came near, the girls stared at each other in amazement, for he was exactly like Mr. Theodore.

When he came close, however, the resemblance lessened: he wore a daintily-trimmed moustache, his hair too was silky and curly, whereas Mr. Theodore's, though the same colour, was very dull and straight; and his dress and manner, all dusty and flurried though he was, was very superior to poor Mr. Theodore's decidedly *outré* style and over-strained demeanour.

When he saw his horse helplessly stretched beneath the shafts, he looked eagerly up and down the roads for help; but help there was none in sight—only the three frightened girls clinging amongst the hedge.

Looking up and seeing their evident alarm, he smiled, and the smile was very becoming; he bowed too, and crossing over to where they were, he addressed them with the polite urbanity of a gentlemen.

"Do you know where I can get any help?" he said. "You see we have come to grief, and my man is hurt, I am afraid. He was

pitched out about a quarter of a mile off. I I can't raise that brute by myself."

Margaret was the least alarmed of the three; in fact, she had already recovered the panic.

"I can help you a little," she said, jumping lightly to the ground. "If you'll undo the harness, I can lift up the shafts while you hold the horse."

"Will you really?" he said; "'pon my word you're very good. He's not vicious, only too fresh;" and between them they managed to free and raise the horse just as the groom came limping up. He had been stunned for a moment, he explained, and had twisted his foot, but he was well enough to assist in soothing the trembling animal, which soon suffered himself to be re-yoked quietly enough; and then the master turned to Margaret and made her many thanks. Pointing to a small portmanteau in the cart, he said he was going to dine and sleep at The

Chase,—perhaps they were staying there,—might he have the pleasure of driving them there—he was sure his horse was safe enough now, etc.

They explained they were not staying at The Chase, and that their way home lay in the opposite direction; and then with an exchange of polite farewells, the ladies walked on, and the gentleman drove off.

In relating this adventure that evening before dinner, the hero described admiringly the graceful strength of his beautiful helper, and the pretty timidity of the two sisters who dare not venture from their shelter till the groom had hold of the horse's head. Thereat Johnny Dale put himself eagerly forward.

"Mother!" he exclaimed, "you've guessed, haven't you? By Jove, that was Margaret; wasn't it?"

"Of course. Oh how curious!" cried Mrs. Dale and the others. "Brown hair, did you say, and lovely complexions? Oh! Susy

and Bell, no doubt. Dear me, how extraordinary!"

"Short and fair and dandified," Mr. Francis Shrugg was saying at the same moment over the shop in Clack High Street, after hearing his daughters' account of the accident, "and like Mr. Theodore. Why, bless me, yes! Going to the Dales, too! It must have been young Robin Shrugg. I wonder if he'll have the decency to call here? But I'm sure we don't want him to do violence to his feelings."

It was Captain Robin Shrugg, as his cousin supposed, and he had the decency to call at the dower house, though it was doing violence to his feelings. First, because he liked to pay occasional little visits to his mother, unknown to inquisitive old acquaintances at Clack, and specially without running the risk of meeting his repudiated brother; and secondly, because he held Mr. Francis Shrugg's whim, as he chose to call his cousin's move to the chemist's shop, in contempt. However, as the Dales

appeared to consider them desirable acquaintances, and as his relationship was a well-known fact, he felt compelled to assent to Johnny's proposition, to ride over to Clack together, to pay his respects.

As the two young men rode up to the door, above which the name of Jeremiah Clacker still flourished, Mr. Theodore came out of the shop. For an instant the brothers glanced at each other—the captain defiantly, Mr. Theodore with a crimson flush and a half attempt to step back into the house; but the captain, being a man of the world, quickly recovered the disagreeable surprise, and made the best of it.

"How are you?" he cried, as he dismounted, speaking as if he was in the habit of meeting him every day, but making no effort to shake hands. "How are you?"

Mr. Theodore, still crimson, looked intently at this favoured brother; he could not affect an indifference he did not feel.

"Quite well, thank you," he answered, with a longing to grasp his brother's hand just once, and to fancy he belonged to somebody; but the captain did not notice the yearning look, nor the involuntary movement of the hand. Theodore went away crushed and bleeding, while Captain Robin went up stairs prepared to be gracious and charming.

"Come down to kill some birds? There used to be plenty," Mr. Francis said, as his young cousin explained he had only come to Shrugg for a few days.

"Yes; I'm come to clear off a plantation or two," he replied. "I always contrive to get leave once or twice during the shooting season; the Dales are to bring their guns over to-morrow. Will you join us?"

Mr. Francis hesitated. A day's walking over those well-remembered grounds would be like the renewing of his youth, when he knew almost every head of game on the estate, and when deferential keepers attended his steps

as the young master of all; but how could he now, old and disinherited, revisit those scenes as a stranger, and accept what was once a right as a civility from this young rival?

"No, no," he said at last; "I'm out of practice, thank you."

"Oh, but come with us, and don't shoot if you don't care about it," Johnny Dale cried heartily. "My father will enjoy himself twice as much if you are with us."

Mr. Francis shook his head, and persevered in his refusal; but he looked kindly at the young men, and talked to them rather more than the young ladies approved; however, Captain Robin managed to leave an agreeable impression behind him. As for his companion, he had long been a favourite with all. Captain Robin delighted Mrs. Dale by his approval of his relations, and that lady instantly determined to do her best to increase his approval. She would be charmed to be the means of getting "one of those dear girls"

well married, though she would on no account like to see her Johnny enslaved by either of them. She eulogized Margaret therefore in particular to her young visitor, all unawares how another listener sat by endorsing every word mentally.

"Yes, indeed!" was Captain Robin's comment on his hostess's lively panegyric; "she is a remarkably beautiful girl. But really Shrugg ought to be ashamed of himself for bringing such a family down to a shop."

"The fact is," Johnny cried, "they ought to be at The Park, Robin, my boy. Can't you persuade the governor to abdicate in their favour?"

"That would be a stretch of disinterested affection, of which I am incapable," Captain Robin said, with a laugh; "but it must have been an awful blow when Francis Shrugg knew he was cut out. I don't know how he could speak to my father again. *I* half expected a cool reception this morning."

"Ah!" said Johnny, "but you're a heathen, most noble captain, and can't understand Christian virtue."

"Johnny, you're growing bumptious," he retaliated. "By the bye, how is Gracey Exelby. When shall I be wanted to do best man?"

"Come, come," Mrs. Dale interrupted, not wishing what was to her a serious subject to be laughed at. "You two young men want keeping in order. I think I'll drive to Clack, and bring some of the girls back with me; then you 'll be obliged to behave properly."

A proposal which was eagerly seconded, and promptly put into execution.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE INDIAN MAIL.

"WE'RE cousins, you know," said Captain Robin, sitting cosily by Margaret's side in the great drawing-room at The Chase that evening. "We ought to call each other by our Christian names; shall we set a good example?"

"All right," said Margaret, who thought him a good-natured little oddity, and received his admiring attention as a matter of course.

"Very well; then now I'll electrify your sister Susy. "By the bye, isn't she engaged to some one?"

"Yes; didn't you know?"

"Well, I've heard, I fancy; but I'm afraid she knows how to flirt."

"Susy flirt!" cried Margaret; "what an idea." Susy was sitting between Mrs. Dale and Mr. Murkitroyd—the latter being a great

favourite with his hostess. Her fair, soft face was slightly turned away from the doctor, who was speaking across her to Mrs. Dale; but his eyes were on the younger lady,—eyes that even from the farther side of the large room seemed to be full of admiration.

"What do you call that then?" Captain Robin continued, as Susy lifted her beautiful eyes slyly, and fixed them on his. "But perhaps coquetry is natural to pretty women, and they don't know when they practise it."

Poor Susy! Mrs. Dale was asking the doctor after a mutual acquaintance who was in India; and, quite unconscious of the deep interest Susy took in India, Mr. Murkitroyd was relating some of his friend's experiences—experiences by no means of a pleasant nature. "I can't understand," he added, "how ladies can stand the discomforts of Indian life; they really must be actuated by the most unselfish, sterling love to go out there." It was this that made Susy's eyes smile upon him; she had

hardly given him credit for such a sentiment before. Mr. Dale came up to carry Margaret off to the piano, where stood Johnny, biding his time. The squire left his son to turn the music, and came back to his guest.

"If you want a treat," he whispered, "go and watch Diana's arm—it's perfect."

"These good people are bewitched," thought the little captain, who had seen too many perfect arms to make a marvel of one. Nevertheless he went and stood where he could have a good view of the performer; and as he stood silently observant, the experienced man of the world made another discovery.

When Margaret finished her piece, Susy took her place at the piano, and played an accompaniment, while Johnny and Margaret sang a duet; their voices blended very beautifully—rich, sweet voices, full and clear with youth and health. "I'd rather hear that than go to the opera," he said to the doctor.

"Ah!" replied the latter, "so would I; the

opera is a mistake. I should like it without all that squalling though."

Which speech being instantly repeated, raised the laugh against Mr. Murkitroyd. Captain Robin was not to be thrown into the shade, he sat down to the piano too, and whistled a fashionable waltz, exhibiting no small skill and taste. After that, at Mr. Dale's earnest request, Susy sang, "Oft in the stilly night;" it was the squire's favourite song, and he always declared Susy to be the only person who sung it as he had heard the poet himself sing it.

Susy's voice was neither powerful nor full, but it was the sweetest, clearest thrill that ever mortal lips gave sound to, and came straight from a pure, tender heart. Even Captain Robin felt its power, and sighed as the sound ceased, as if awakened from a delicious reverie; but Mr. Murkitroyd, whose eyes had never left the singer's face while she sang, turned away as soon as she stopped, and was silent while all the rest were complimenting her. Tender

face, tender tones, tender words: they had crept and entwined themselves in and about the surgeon's soul, and the long ride home through the silent country under the moonlight sky fettered and chained them closer and faster.

Susy and Margaret slept at The Chase. The two young men smoked together before going to bed.

"Tell you what it is," said the captain confidentially; "if you are to marry Grace Exelby, you'd better be quick about it, my boy. Cousin Margaret would be a dangerous rival."

John Dale winked to himself, "What makes you say this?" he asked, with a rapid beating at his heart.

"Never mind; I merely give a friendly warning."

"So kind of you!" said Johnny, with a laugh, meant to be easy, but which was rather embarrassed.

Captain Robin said no more, but he thought a good deal. Like all little men, he had an

ardent admiration for tall women, and he was very much struck with Margaret Shrugg.

"I'd go in for her myself," thought he, "and cut that great, hulking fellow out in no time,"—Johnny Dale's stalwart figure being thus maligned. "But I really couldn't sacrifice myself for a chemist's daughter,—and that's all she is in the eyes of the world. Yet it's a pity for her to lose her time with that idle young fellow."

Captain Shrugg closed his eyes in the full assurance he could cut out any man twice his size in the affections of any lady; perhaps he had as little real ground for this belief as for the supposition that Johnny Dale was worshipping at Diana's shrine.

And Diana, laying her brilliant head on her pillow, said to Susy,—

"This kind of visiting is really more enjoyable than a crowded London party; isn't it? What nice, kind people these Dales are. What an enviable life is Johnny's."

"O Margaret!" said Susy; "you always condemned idle men; and I do think Johnny is wasting his time and talents."

"Oh, well; yes, perhaps," Margaret replied. "But then, you see, what can he do? he's an only child. How could he leave home, you know? And I'm sure he does a great deal on the estate, and he's travelled a great deal, and is very accomplished."

"Yes," Susy acquiesced sleepily. But Margaret lay long awake, wondering what handsome Johnny Dale could see to love and admire in Miss Grace Exelby.

And while handsome Johnny Dale slept profoundly, his mother was congratulating herself on the evident success of her plan to entrap Captain Robin for his cousin.

"I never saw him pay such undivided attention to any girl before," she told her husband.

"No!" said the latter. "Well, she's far too good for that little, finnicking fellow."

Mr. Murkitroyd rode home in the still November night, with bright and hopeful thoughts, as we have seen. All the lights were out in Clack High Street as he passed through, and only his own coloured lamp broke the shadows of the dark houses. A man stood at his door as he drew up—the telegraph man from Nunbriar station.

"Holloa," cried the doctor, "what's up now?"

"I've been waiting this hour or more, sir," said the man. "I were too tired to come out to t' Dales. Here's a message to sign."

The surgeon took the paper, and called for a light in his sitting-room; and when it came, opened the envelope with scarcely any curiosity till he saw the sender's name.

"David Murkitroyd, Leeds, to Peter Murkitroyd, Clack. Jonas is dead,—come home."

Nothing else, but it spoke volumes to the receiver. Jonas, the beloved prodigal, was dead,—how, Heaven knew; and in that great

grief the father's anger against his remaining son was softened.

This was great news with which to greet Susy and Margaret on their return home next day. Norah was full of it:—had she not heard it all from Crocodilla, who had questioned Mr. Murkitroyd's housekeeper? and Crocodilla and Mr. Theodore both thought he would never come back to Clack; for now his father would keep him at home, and he would have all the money. And Norah told how a shroud had pointed at Mr. Murkitroyd only two months ago; and Theodore said he hadn't been at all surprised when he heard what had happened, for they had all been on the look-out for something of the sort ever since; and Crocodilla had heard a robin singing twice in the night, which every one knows to be a sure sign of death, and she had feared it meant her mother; but now she remembered the cat had mewed the last time Mr. Murkitroyd visited them, and it had also sniffed at his boots.

Thus poor Jonas' death afforded amusement for volatile Norah.

Mr. Theodore came bustling into Mrs. Shrugg's sitting-room, two or three days later.

"I've got a letter from our good doctor," he explained. "I'm sure you'll like to hear about him. His brother died suddenly,—of course they'll bring it in disease of the heart; but it was more likely this,"—and he raised his hand to his lips, significantly,—"and he's left our Mr. Murkitroyd all his property."

Here Mr. Theodore stopped to watch the effect of his disclosure.

"Lucky fellow!" Mr. Francis cried. "But how came the brother to have property?"

"He was partner in the business," Mr. Theodore explained; "the old gentleman took him in, to spite our doctor. And besides that, he inherited twenty thousand pounds from an uncle, only the other day, sir. Oh yes! our doctor is a rich man now, ladies, and I'm sure he deserves it; but it'll take him away from us,—that's the worst."

"Does he say so?"

"Well, no; *tout o contrairy*, as the Crapauds say,—quite the contrary, that is,—as I'm sure you know," and he smiled round on the young ladies. "He says, he will be back as soon as he's wound up his brother's affairs; but of course that means only for a time. Ah! if I'd twenty thousand pounds left to me, I'd fly to-morrow to sunny Italy, there to float in the arts—literally to float in the arts; but our doctor has no taste that way,—indeed, no disparagement,—though I doubt if he knows a Guido from a Rubini;" and he shook his head as he added, "nevertheless, he's a very superior mind. They published a letter from him in the *Lancet* the other day. Well, it is right some should be working bees; the world would soon be lost if we were all butterflies."

Mr. Murkitroyd was back again long before Christmas. He wasn't sure of his plans, he said; at all events, he couldn't leave Clack in the lurch at a moment's notice. He was in

good spirits, for his natural regret for his brother's death, was lessened by that brother's life; and now, too, he had the means to marry at once.

At once! Yes; he would have no more doubting and hesitating. He had known her long enough,—three months at least,—he would begin at once to show how he regarded her. So the very day after his return to Clack, he called at the dower house, going first of all, according to his custom, to see Mr. Shrugg in his sanctum. Mr. Francis was very cordial to him: he had long got over his distrustful feeling towards him; and the surgeon, treating him as an old friend, discussed his change of fortune freely with him. While they were talking, the shopman brought in the afternoon's post, and Mr. Murkitroyd noticed an Indian letter.

"Excuse me one moment," said Mr. Francis, taking up this letter immediately. "Here, Norah!" he cried, standing in the hall,—

"here," as Norah came running down the stairs, "take this to Susy."

Then he heard a glad exclamation, as if from some one higher up, and the sound of rapid steps descending eagerly, and next a confused scramble and rustle. At this he rushed to the door, and was just in time to see something come headlong down the stairs, and fall with a dull thud in a heap at the bottom.

It was Susy.

White as a sheet, and still holding the letter, Norah stood on the stairs above.

"O papa!" she cried, "it was my fault; she reached out her hand to take it, and I pulled it away in fun, and she lost her balance;"—and Norah shrieked as if in frenzy.

Mr. Murkitroyd knew all in an instant; but as he lifted the seemingly lifeless girl, private sentiment gave place to professional anxiety, for if she were not dead, it was probable her future life would be a burden to her.

She was not dead. By-and-by consciousness returned, and with it terrible suffering; and within half an hour after Susy had danced eagerly down stairs to get her love letter, the verdict had gone forth,—she was crippled for life.

No one took account of the hours that followed; all through the night it was feared she must die. Mr. Murkitroyd sent for the most noted surgeons from York and Liverpool,—if earthly skill could save, Susy should be saved.

"What is their fee?" Mr. Shrugg asked, as the young man came to tell him the result of the consultation. The poor father was distracted with Susy's peril, and his own inability to reward the doctors properly.

"Fee!" cried Mr. Murkitroyd, in an off-hand manner; "professional men never take fees from professionals,—you would mightily annoy them to offer anything of the sort;" and Mr. Francis never dreamed that more

than £100 was paid in his name within two days after the accident.

And Susy lived through tortures—and prayed to live on; for life, even in pain, seemed sweeter than death to her. She never asked if she were crippled, and no one had courage to tell her the extent of her danger. That she might lie there helplessly for weeks—perhaps months—she believed; but recovery seemed sure at last,—recovery in time to meet William, and then to forget all past agony in present bliss.

For nearly a week the letter remained unopened; and Mr. Murkitroyd,—who by that time knew all about her engagement,—guessed it lay where it did,—under her pillow; for she was yet too feeble to read it herself, and could not let any one read it to her. But at last, her longing overcame her scruples, and she asked Norah to read it aloud. Susy had guessed how Norah had suffered for her unintentional share in the accident; and this

choice of her to open the cherished letter, was one of the many loving ways by which the elder sister tried to comfort the younger. How often had inquisitive Norah longed to see the inside of what she called "a real love letter"! and her colour was as bright as Susy's as she opened this.

"Here is an inclosure, dear," she said, "not in Willy's writing; which shall I read first?"

"Oh, Willy's, of course."

"MY OWN DEAR SUSY,"—

"Oh, how nice of him!" cried Norah, stopping to signify her approval of this tender beginning.

"I hope you will be delighted to hear there is a great chance of my getting my company almost immediately. I am going hard to work to prepare for the exam. I knew of this before, but would not tell you till it was more certain. Now there is no doubt that Winter must quit the service, and of course that gives us all steps, gratis! and this will

enable us to furnish our bungalow in fine style." "Our!" Norah said, *en parenthèse.* "Doesn't that sound nice?"

Susy lay with a happy smile over her pale face. "Go on, dear," she said, almost gaily. "Oh, I must make haste and get well." Norah went on rapidly.

"I will telegraph as soon as I know officially, and you will prepare to come out in January; won't you? I wish you'd persuade one of your sisters to come with you,—you won't like travelling with strangers. Try and bring Margaret: tell her she'd make no end of a sensation here, and she's not too proud to let me have the pleasure of paying her passage; for it will be the greatest comfort to me to know you have her with you, and the greatest delight to me to show her off in India. And I have saved such heaps of money that it will be a charity to help me to spend it,—so that altogether she will do me an immense favour by coming out."

Norah did not try to comment; she knew how unlikely it was that Susy's bright hopes would be accomplished; but Susy herself, interrupted here :—

"Isn't he good and generous?" she said, softly. "I dare say he has been denying himself everything."

"You will come out at the best time of year," Norah continued, "and be quite acclimatized before the heat sets in. Don't bring a lot of expensive clothes; you can get anything from Calcutta, and you only want a few visiting things here. All the ladies wear white, thin things—net or muslin,—or whatever you call it. We are in the midst of the beastly rains—nothing thrives but mould. I am going out to dinner to-night, and expect to be drowned going; for there's a nullah to cross, which sometimes fills with a rush; but our 'paternal' Government thinks it cheaper to lose a few human lives than to spend rupees over a bridge. I shall leave early, so as to finish

this in time for the dâk early to-morrow morning, and to tell you how I got on. I accept all nice invitations so as to have some friends for you; and the people to whom I am going now are *very* nice,—they own the one spinster of the station. I am told she has an offer of marriage every day, but is holding out for a commissioner. You see we manage to do a little gossip out here! Good-bye, for the present, my Susy,—my wife so soon to be. I shall write *officially* to your father next mail."

Here Norah stopped. "There is no more," she said; "I suppose he hasn't had time to finish,—only this inclosure."

"Well, dear," Susy exclaimed, "that's from him too; it must be—no one else would write to me. Read it, dear."

"Well; it isn't like his writing!" Norah said, as she opened the inclosure; and then there was silence.

Susy, looking at her sister, saw every atom

of colour die out of her face; and then an intense fear possessed her.

"What is it?" she cried. "Tell me quickly! Is he dead?"

And Norah, impelled by the agony in Susy's voice to answer truly, said only,—

"Yes; he is dead."

CHAPTER IX.

THE GILDED CAGE

To be only seventeen, very pretty, very healthy; to be rich, to have a fine house, fine carriages and horses, obedient servants, many acquaintances; to have known no sorrow, to have no bitter memories,—all this surely constitutes the sum total of earthly happiness: and all this was possessed by Mrs. Polkely Seton. Nevertheless, Mrs. Polkely Seton was not so happy as a school-girl: for the latter revels in her two half-holidays a week, while the former had never a holiday at all. But she was not unhappy: she did not even think her position unnatural; she was a good little girl, trying her utmost to be thankful for the splendour she owned, and only sometimes wondering, and then very vaguely, why she was not quite satisfied. She had been transplanted into another

world, and her old friends and habits were left behind. Mr. Seton did not approve of Emily Clayton; and although Linda only cared for her because she had known her from childhood, her occasional companionship would have been pleasant now during the long day which Mr. Seton generally spent in his office in the city.

Every day Linda practised her music for two hours; her husband made it a point of honour with her to observe the time rigidly. Nearly every day, too, there was music to be copied; for Mr. Seton was a great lover of music, and himself played the violin. Linda hated copying music, and sometimes wondered why she should be so troubled, when they were rich enough to buy it ready printed; but stifling this as an ungrateful thought, she did her best to copy it neatly. Then there were certain standard works to be read, also for a stated time daily. Thiers' "Consulate" was to be studied in connection with Gibbon's "Decline and Fall." She read these diligently, wishing

she was more intellectual to appreciate such excellent works; and on these studies her husband's conversation turned during the daily drive. Linda would often remember a book at home, called "Evenings at Home," wherein a highly educated parent, acquainted with every science and history, past, present, and to come, answers leading questions put by his precious offspring, whose thirst for knowledge is as insatiable as it is evidently hereditary,—and think how similar these dialogues were to those. They went to many parties, and entertained their great acquaintances in return. But these were dreary ceremonials to the girl; once or twice she had been seated at dinner by a lively young bachelor, and had, naturally enough, preferred talking to him than to the respectable elderly gentleman, who by right of his years and wealth had taken her downstairs. Mr. Seton was not jealous, he assured her; but he begged her to remember that, as his wife, it was desirable for her to cultivate men who

might be good business connections; and Linda, fearing she had shown great levity, meekly promised to remember his injunction.

Mr. Seton's most intimate friend was a gentleman in his own business, and about his own age. This gentleman—Mr. Mowlam, had acted as best man at the wedding, and had ever since been a frequent visitor in Hyde Park Gardens: he played the flute, and like his host, was a scientific performer, and carefully eschewed all music that had any time in it. These gentlemen never tired of hearing themselves execute tedious "movements in B," and "Studies on Symphony," making poor Linda, whose taste was decidedly for light and lively melodies, keep subordinate accompaniment on the pianoforte. The only break in these long practisings being the one, two, three, of Mr. Seton's fiddlestick counting for Linda's benefit, and the screwing up and down of his fiddle strings. When a string broke she got a little rest, which was appreciated;

it was lucky her husband never guessed how much more musical to his wife's ears was the snapping of that string than his scientific grinding at his scientific numbers.

Linda believed herself to be a very fortunate girl, notwithstanding all these drawbacks, and not yet, even for an instant had she repented of her marriage. By-and-by she would tell herself, when she was older she would be happier still, when she no longer felt in awe of her servants, nor oppressed by the grand gloom of her large rooms. She was quite aware that she was a goose to fear her servants. Yet she did fear them, and dare not even ask them for her own at unreasonable hours. With her young, healthy appetite—that of a still growing girl, the time between the punctual nine o'clock breakfast and the half-past one luncheon was too long for her to fast; but cake and biscuits were locked up with the dessert by the butler. So in the midst of plenty she often starved, because she feared to appear greedy.

Every morning at ten o'clock Mr. Seton drove to the city, and Linda, attended by her maid—a sedate, elderly person, walked in the gardens on which her house opened, for one hour. Mrs. Shrugg had wisely chosen her daughter should not take one of her mother's servants to her new home. She knew what an inducement that would have been for mistress and maid to become familiar. And Linda, in consequence, regarded her attendant as another formidable stranger, and even hesitated to assert her own taste in dress when Mrs. Marsh superintended her toilette. Luckily the woman was as honest as she was prim, and instead of taking advantage of her inexperienced mistress, did her best to deserve the trust reposed in her. The walk over, Linda had her book and practising to attend to, and to sit in the great, grand drawing-room, to receive visitors—that great, magnificent room, where Linda dare not move a chair, nor draw up a blind, nor leave her work about,

and where the furniture having been arranged by a fashionable upholsterer, must on no account be disturbed. Once she had expressed her admiration for pictures, and had suggested that the dining-room would look well hung with good engravings; but Mr. Seton objected, on the score that they would destroy the handsome flock paper—an unanswerable argument.

Sometimes he came home to luncheon, sometimes not till late in the afternoon, and then the carriage was ordered, and the two hours' drive taken.

Linda had not yet heard of Susy's accident; in fact, at home, they were purposely keeping the news back till they could give a better report; and now that other sad tidings had also to be told, they were all still more reluctant to tell them; and already Linda was beginning to wonder why they were so long writing. But this wonder she kept to herself, for she had already discovered her husband by no means appreciated her clinging

interest in her own family, now she was his wife.

Mrs. Burcham was abroad, there was therefore no one on either side personally to interfere with the newly-married couple—except, indeed, Miss Emily Clayton, who finding her visits were not encouraged in Hyde Park Gardens, took care whenever she managed to get Linda apart from her husband, laudably to express her real opinion.

"Well, dear," she would say, "yours is a very fine marriage, no doubt; but I'd rather myself have less disparity and less grandeur. I'm not mercenary, I'm not; but then of course I've got enough of my own to set me above that sort of thing."

And Linda, all her life accustomed to Miss Clayton's free and unvarnished speeches, did not dream of resenting them as impertinent now. She certainly considered them unkind, and was the less inclined to object to the former intimacy between them being curtailed to mere acquaintanceship.

The secret was, that Miss Clayton had done her best to be Mrs. Polkely Seton herself, and that Mr. Seton was fully aware of hers as of all other manœuvres to this effect. Rejected addresses certainly require more than human fortitude to bear complacently. And Miss Clayton set too high a value on herself to bear them even patiently.

Linda first became aware of Susy's illness in an unexpected and by no means pleasant manner.

It was at the theatre, where Mr. Seton had taken her to hear a new play, written by Mr. Mowlam's brother, and where Mr. Mowlam accompanied them. They had a private box, of course. Mr. Seton would by no means have allowed his toes to be trodden upon in the dress circle, or scrambled over in the the stalls; and very comfortable they were till the piece was half over, when Mr. Seton became aware that his wife's pretty face had attracted the undivided attention of a young

gentleman in the stalls below, and that she herself was conscious and uncomfortable. For some time Mr. Seton tried, by drawing himself up and fixedly staring down upon the impertinent admirer, to cause him to avert his eyes, but in vain, he even returned his gaze pleasantly; at last, when an unmistakable smile and nod was unmistakably directed to Linda, Mr. Seton's wrath broke out. Poor Linda! she had long seen this little, fair-haired dandy smilingly regarding her, and had at first fancied his regards were directed to a neighbour. In vain had she tried to divert them from herself by trying to be engrossed with the play, but furtively she felt compelled to see whether she had been successful; and as her gaze met his, at last came the smiling bow of intimacy.

The scarlet cheeks and agitated voice, as she assured her husband she had never seen the saluter before, alarmed him. He began to suspect some foul conspiracy against his

peace of mind; and scowling down at the perfectly placid face, he muttered his intention of having "the vagabond turned out." However, he was too gentlemanly to make a row in public, on his wife's account, and contented himself with ordering Linda into the background.

Then, to his dismay, the gentleman, after seemingly waiting for her re-appearance, left his stall, and in a few moments entered the box.

"Sir!" cried Mr. Seton, starting up, and hotly opposing his further entrance; "what do you mean?"

"Oh, don't!" cried Linda, faintly. While Mr. Mowlam quickly laid his hand on his friend's arm, as if fearing violence would ensue; and the new comer's bland countenance changed from gay assurance to utter dismay.

"Miss Bell!" the latter exclaimed, questioningly.

"No!" cried Mr. Seton; "she is not Miss Bell, sir; she is my wife, and I insist upon—"

"Stop!" the little gentleman interrupted, with a dignified gesture; "stop, my good sir, I see there is some mistake. I assure you, I thought this young lady was my cousin."

This seemed adding insult to injury, and Mr. Seton made a step forward.

"If you do not leave this box this moment, sir," he exclaimed, "I'll—I'll—"

But the intruder stood his ground manfully.

"Indeed, I cannot go until I prove no insult was thought of on my part," he said; and his calm attitude had an effect on the other. "You must allow me to explain myself. My name is Shrugg; and this young lady is so extremely like my cousin, Miss Bell Shrugg, that even now, though I see there is a difference, I am puzzled."

"Then you must be Captain Robin!" Linda exclaimed, delighted. "I am Linda,—Bell's sister.'

"Mrs. Polkely Seton," her husband added.

"Ah, really now!" cried Captain Robin, coming in, and seating himself between the husband and wife; "this is more than coincidence; isn't it, now. I was beginning to think I should have to send for my certificate of baptism to prove myself respectable; eh? So you are my cousin, after all. I am obliged to you, Seton, for not breaking my head; eh!" Then he added, looking at Linda,—"But there's the most extraordinary resemblance; I was a little puzzled, though, how Miss Bell could have got here, especially as Miss Susy is so ill. How is she—not seriously hurt, I hope? I left The Park, you know, only a day or two before her accident."

Mr. Seton was quite mollified. He knew Captain Robin well by repute, and no harm was spoken of the little man; he was the fashion in higher circles than ever Mr. Seton frequented, therefore the latter could bear to hear himself hailed as Seton; and the fact was

undeniable that the twin sisters were wonderfully alike.

"Susy ill—an accident?" Linda exclaimed, in quiet alarm.

Captain Shrugg gave a very mild account of Susy's fall,—of her lover's death he had not heard; but he said enough to disquiet Linda. And again and again did Mr. Seton bitterly regret going to the theatre.

The very next morning came the long expected letter. It was from Bell; she, too, made as little of the accident as she could, to spare Linda; but the latter understood the motive, and feared the more.

"She may not be a cripple for life," Bell said; "we hope not: but poor Willy's death will throw her back;" and Bell told how Willy met his death.

He left the party before any one, to be home in time to finish his letter. Heavy rain had been falling all the evening; and as the bridgeless nullah over which his way lay must be very

much swollen, his friends tried to persuade him to remain with them till the stream should have subsided: as these Indian storm-born streams subside as quickly as they rise. But he was in high spirits, and laughed at their cautions.

His host, and one or two other officers walked by his horse's side to the edge of the nullah, which was, as they expected, much swollen, and roaring swiftly onward; the night was very dark, and the syce carried a lantern. Colonel Cromley, his host, told William Somers to shout when he had safely crossed, to assure them of his safety; and with many jokes the latter bade them good-bye; but his horse refused to enter the water, and became very restive on being pressed. Seeing this, and still determined to carry his point, the young man sent the animal back for the night to his friend's stables, and taking the lantern from his syce, proceeded to cross on foot. His friends stood to watch the unsteady light, and

could hear him halloaing as if in derision at their cowardice. These shouts may have been shouts for help, for the wind and water were making a deafening noise all the time; but they were taken as shouts of derisive assurances of safety, and as soon as the light was no longer visible, they concluded all was right.

The next morning happening to be a weekly holiday, there was no parade, and consequently he was not missed till the middle of the day; when a friend called at his bungalow, and found the servants beginning to be alarmed at his absence. His hat, picked up near the spot on which he was last seen, pointed to his fate.

His soldiers followed the course of the stream untiringly for days, but it was not till the fourth day that his body was found. The President of the Committee of Adjustment, who forwarded these details with the unfinished letter, directed by poor William's own hand, did not say it was so disfigured by jackals or alligators as to be known only by

the uniform; he only added that the whole station followed to his burial, and he was deservedly and universally lamented.

He begged Miss Shrugg to let his relations know what had happened: but there was no other address than hers found amongst his papers, therefore she was the only one with whom they could communicate at present.

"Mamma has written to every one," said Bell, for of course poor Susy can't. Oh, how I wish you were here, dear Linda; we are all so miserable."

"Very selfish, indeed," said Mr. Seton, stiffly, as his wife read this with many sobs, "wishing you to be as unhappy as she is. I wonder they are not thankful you are away."

"She means we could help each other to bear it," sobbed Linda. "Oh, poor Susy! it will kill her."

"My dear Linda, pray don't agitate yourself so unnecessarily. Drink your tea; that will do you good. I am very grieved your sister has

met with an accident,—truly grieved; but as for her intended's death, *that* will prove itself a blessing. Their engagement was ill-advised and most imprudent; I really cannot grieve it is annulled."

Linda looked at him in dismay. Such sentiments were positively appalling to her. "Oh, you didn't know him," she cried; "he was so handsome, so good-tempered, and so fond of Susy."

"He was a penniless subaltern," said Mr. Seton, rather sternly. "Such men have no right to marry; it is sheer, mean selfishness, and their marriages ought to be put down by authority. They get a lot of children, and then die, and leave government to pittance their families. Love has nothing to do with such marriages; for love would scorn to bring its object to discomfort and penury. If I ever enter parliament, it will be with the hope of passing a law to prevent poor clergymen and officers propagating paupers."

Linda shrunk back, such reasoning was almost blasphemous. She ventured to say,—

"But if both husband and wife are poor, surely they might share each other's poverty?"

"A false and dangerous argument," interposed her husband. "Don't you see, my dear, their poverty does not end with themselves —they become responsible for generations struggling to live. I will say now I was always much astonished your father countenanced your sister's most blamable engagement. However, it is all happily ended, and as soon as she is well, we will have her here, and I dare say we can introduce her more suitably."

Then Mr. Seton rose, and kissed Linda's tear-swollen face, and bade her try some new "movements" to dissipate her sadness; and went off to his office, feeling honestly pleased that his pretty sister-in-law had escaped a bad marriage.

When he had gone, Linda cried as she had

never cried in her life before: lonely tears of sorrow for the living and the dead,—for Susy in her double trouble, and for Willy Somers in his early grave; and then came tears for herself, and for her future life that suddenly rose before her in all its bareness and loneliness. While this latter and new-born feeling possessed her, Miss Clayton was announced.

"Why, Linda!" she cried, coming forward, with real trouble in her voice. "I'm so sorry. I saw the Sims's blinds down, so I went to ask why; and there I saw a letter from your mamma, saying Somers has been drowned, and Susy has broken her back!"

"O Emily!—not broken her back?"

"Oh, dear! I thought you knew," cried Miss Clayton.

"So I do. But Bell didn't say that; she says Susy fell down some steps, and hurt herself."

"Well; never mind, dear," Emily Clayton said, really meaning to be kind. "You mustn't give way, you know, but prepare yourself for

everything. I suppose you are going off at once. Mrs. Sims said she was sure you would go by the early train; she knew you hadn't heard yesterday, for your mamma said so."

"Did you think I should go home? Oh! I wish I could."

"Well; it'll be very odd if you don't," said her friend. "Why, Linda, Susy must be very bad indeed. I am afraid she'll never get over it, dear!"

"O Emily!" cried Linda, bursting into fresh tears; "don't say so. Oh! what shall I do? I'm sure Mr. Seton won't like me to go so far, this cold weather, too."

"Well, then, I wouldn't ask him, but just go. I declare I'd half a mind to go too, for I do love Susy; but I expect I should be in the way." Even this sympathy was grateful, and Linda was comforted by talking to some one who knew her home so well.

"I would give everything in the world to

go," she exclaimed. "I will ask Mr. Seton to take me."

"Then you'll be very silly," said Emily; "he'd as soon fly as go to Clack, *I* know. Why now, Linda, you know as well as I do, he'd rather die than go and stay over a shop."

"No; indeed, there you are wrong, Emily. He's not a snob."

"Well dear, ask him, and you'll see he'll refuse even to let you go. You can't go alone, you know; and he wouldn't like his servants to know *all*."

"Why couldn't I go alone?"

"Gracious! What, Mrs. Polkely Seton travel alone!"

"Now, Emily, dear, do help me. What can I do?"

"Do! Why, be a woman, to be sure. What's the good of being married, if you can't do as you like? Go at once, and leave word, as a matter of course, that you've gone to see your dying sister."

"Oh, not dying!"

"Well, dear, I hope not. I love Susy better than all of you put together; and I like you all better than any of my relations, I can tell you. I do think it's your duty to go home now; and I know you'd be 'awfully cut up' if anything happened before you could see her again."

Linda sat thinking when her visitor had gone; and the desire to be at home grew stronger and stronger.

Why should she not go at once? If she waited to ask her husband, Susy might be dead before she got there. Besides, if he refused, she could not act in open opposition to his will. Whereas, why should she suppose he would be angry if she went without waiting for his opinion. Thicker and faster came sophistry and temptation, until only the fear of being too late was listened to. She could come back the very next day, before he could have time to be angry,—if he became angry. She was going as a matter of duty. No harm could

happen to her; there were no bewildering changes on the way. In fact, she would see nothing but the necessity for the journey; and she started.

To say she felt like a runaway, would hardly express the extent of her feelings as she prepared for the journey; and the train had scarcely left London with her in it, before she saw both sides of the question. Would not the fact of her surreptitious start prove she knew her husband would object—and this proved, was she not acting in wilful opposition to his desire? Besides, were Susy dying, would not her mother herself have urged Linda to come? It was too late; and when Mr. Seton came home earlier than usual, thinking poor little Linda might be dull, the following note awaited him.

"My dear Jason,—Mrs. Sims has heard from mamma a very bad account of Susy. I am afraid she is dying, and I don't know what

I should do if I never see her again. I am afraid to be too late if I wait till you come home. I shall just catch the three o'clock express, and be in Yorkshire in good time. I will come back to-morrow, if you like. I don't take any one with me for so short a time. I will telegraph from Nunbriar and tell you I am safe. Please accept my love.

"Your affectionate wife,

"LINDA SETON."

Woman's wit had helped Linda to concoct this the first letter she had had occasion to write to him. She had always been too shy to call him by his Christian name, as he wished her to do; but on this great occasion it became a powerful weapon to disarm his anger which at first rose hot against her. She had been prudent, too, and had not taken one of his household to witness her family's manners. She had driven to the station, moreover, in his carriage, and his footman had put her properly into the

train. Moreover she was to telegraph from her journey's end, which would check any idea, if it should arise amongst his servants, that she had run away, as Mr. Seton himself considered she had. So he restrained himself before his watchful butler, and appeared to be neither perturbed nor surprised by her sudden departure; while in his heart, if he were not angry, he was 'desperately annoyed' that she was capable of taking the law into her own hands in this way. First, he thought of going off to Mrs. Sims to hear what her news was. But this afterwards seemed 'an undignified proceeding, which would give licence to gossip.' So he took his drive and dinner as usual; but neither practised his violin nor smoked his cigar that evening. Before he went to bed, the following telegram reached him.

"Nunbriar—quite safe—will write to-morrow."

Upon the receipt of which he wrote as follows, for the morning's post.

MY DEAR WIFE,—I need not say I was *surprised* to find 'your sisterly fears had so entirely overruled your wifely duties.' 'You will, I hope, discover the former were over-strained.' I am in receipt of your telegram. Pray remain with your parents as long as you and they desire. If you will apprise me of your return, I will meet you at the station. I hope an *eligible* escort may be found for your return journey. With kind compliments to your family, and love to yourself, allow me to subscribe myself,

Your affectionate husband,

"JASON POLKELY SETON."

CHAPTER X.

SORROW AND PAIN.

He was right. Linda felt she had far better have remained at home, almost before she had got there. It was between nine and ten o'clock at night before she left the train; and then there was the long drive from Nunbriar to Clack in a jolting chaise, through snow-covered roads, with a dark sky overhead, and ghostly trees and hedgerows rising spectrally on either hand, and intense cold chilling her very bones.

Clack was buried in snow and slumber, when at last the tired traveller found herself at her father's door. No lights were visible; no sound was audible above, below, and around; the bell had been muffled, and gave back no ring in answer to the cabman's benumbed pulls. Susy had fallen into a deep, swoon-like sleep; and

the others, all wearied out with days and nights of anxious watching, were sleeping soundly. Linda, sitting in the cab, and watching and listening in vain, began to cry with sheer fatigue and cold; and the cabman, losing all patience, begged to be permitted to fling a stone at one of the windows; when the door of the next house was opened, and a little gentleman in a dressing-gown looked cautiously out. On seeing the cab he came outside, and thrusting his candle forward, demanded in a whisper what they wanted.

Linda guessed who he was.

"O Mr. Theodore!" she cried, "we can't make them hear. Is she—is Susy worse?"

Folding his wrapper more closely round him, Mr. Theodore went up to the cab.

"Excuse me!" he began with a polite bow, "but may I ask the name of the fair lady by whom I am addressed?"

When he heard who it was, his courtesy was even greater. What an honour for him to

awake and fancy he heard a horse's muffled tread on nature's fleecy covering. What unexpected happiness, to be the first to welcome the young bride to her paternal residence! Oh yes, he could make the ungracious portals open for her entrance. The song must be reversed: it must be, Get up and *un*bar the door for this occasion! And so chattering, he got her out and ushered her into Mrs. Clacker's little parlour, yet warm with the scarcely extinguished fire; and leaving her there, he hastily ran and dressed, and then climbing over the garden wall, he managed to make the household hear him at the back of the house.

There, though Linda was warmed and fed, and kissed and blessed, she saw her arrival was more a plague than a blessing. She had roused them all from much needed rest; and when her parents knew all, she saw they disapproved of the manner of her coming, though they were too tender to say as much. Susy

unfortunately heard, though the utmost caution had been used in their movements. And in her pain and weakness she became excited and hysterical, and Mr. Shrugg had to call Mr. Murkitroyd in. The latter, after administering a soothing draught, joined the family, and without hesitation told Mrs. Seton it was a pity she had arrived so inopportunely, and she might be thankful if she escaped a sick room on her own account, in consequence of her cold journey.

"He is a bear," Linda said afterwards, but her opinion was not seconded; indeed, his kindness had been so great since their trouble, that all the family appreciated it. Then Linda saw, too, how her coming disturbed the domestic arrangements; and, indeed, when she at length laid her aching head on her pillow, it was with a half wish she was back in her accustomed place.

Susy was not likely to die; but Mr. Murkitroyd did not smile as he gave this verdict,

for he saw before her a long vista of pain and trial and helplessness.

"Oh, yes; she'll be able to leave her bed soon," he added, in reply to her father's anxious inquiries; "the sooner the better, in fact."

"And to walk again?" added her mother.

The surgeon turned his face away.

"Perhaps," he said faintly, and neither parents dare ask further.

Susy herself had not yet asked the extent of her accident, and Mr. Murkitroyd was nervously apprehensive of the answer to be given when she did. Her patience and gentleness and gratitude through all her suffering had proved to him her good qualities were not mere surface virtues, visible only when life smiled upon her; but he no longer regarded her as a woman to be loved and worn in his household, but rather to be cherished as a holy memory. Alas! it seemed so likely she must soon be only a memory. When he had seen her for the first time after her lover's

death, he walked down stairs straight out of the house, without, as usual, going into the sitting-room. Not a word had passed between them except on the state of her health; but something in her face and voice touched him so deeply, he was afraid of 'being unmanned.' He could see there had been no storm of agony, no wild, mortal-like appeal against the swift destruction of all her hopes. She had acknowledged Whose Hand had smitten, and with all her soul tried to say it had smitten in love; and in the sweet soft eyes, so weary and troubled, Mr. Murkitroyd read an expression that assured him she had found a resting-place and a Comforter.

But he kept all these soft ideas to himself, and no one gave him credit for such.

"So you think me a bear?" he said brusquely to Linda, the day after her arrival. "How do I know? Why, I was passing the door. I thought you meant me to hear. I told you the truth; why shouldn't you pay me back in my own coin? I *do* think you

were wrong in coming here: sentiment is not always convenient.' Now what can you do but give trouble to poor Betsy Jane, who has enough to do already. Crocky Clacker is worth her weight in gold to your sister just now. I'd rather see her in her room than any of you."

"Thank you," said Bell.

"You are very welcome," he replied, laughing. "But now be good girls, and go and look after that poor old soul next door; she's dying to see the young lady from London."

"Send one or two of them back with Mrs. Seton," he said afterwards, to their mother, "and keep the house as quiet as you can. Miss Susy will be more inclined to come out of her room when there are fewer people about."

Margaret agreed with him. She would upon no account go herself, but Bell and Norah might. But Norah protested she would beg her way back again if she were sent from Susy. So Linda wrote to her husband to say

she would remain at Clack till she heard whether he had any objection to her bringing Bell back with her, and would then return. To say the truth, Linda felt rather awkward about their meeting; and her sister's presence would give her courage. Mr. Seton telegraphed his consent, and on the third day poor Linda's brief holiday was over; but she had been greatly comforted by seeing with her own eyes exactly how matters stood; and henceforth she could picture the family habits, and understand allusions to their friends, and feel herself nearer to them all than she could before. She was introduced to Mrs. Robert Shrugg (who had shown so much sympathy and kindness to Susy, that the latter had admitted her into her room, and even shown interest in her), and to the Dales, and had declared Johnny Dale to be the very nicest young man she had ever met,—a remark which Norah and Nelly vehemently seconded, while Margaret said nothing.

Mrs. Dale was delighted with Linda, and very indignant at her short stay. She insisted on sending her large warm carriage to take the twins to the station at Nunbriar; and refrained from going herself, that two of the others might accompany them so far. So Margaret and Norah took the vacant places, and a merry drive the four had over the frozen roads.

The change from the sorrowful house to the rapid movement through the sharp bracing air raised their spirits; they were all so young that sorrow could not take very lasting hold of them, especially a sorrow that was more of sympathy than personal on poor Willy's account; and already they were getting accustomed to think of Susy as an invalid. The roses were brilliant on their cheeks when they reached Nunbriar, and their arrival made quite a sensation amongst the idlers at the little station.

The train was late: Christmas was near,

and the traffic was increasing on the line. It was three o'clock before the train came up, which should have started at half-past two; and as it drew up to the platform, Johnny Dale sprang out of it in shooting costume, and hurried to the sisters.

Of course, mere accident had made him choose to return home in that roundabout fashion, and so early in the day; but he was very glad to be able to see the young ladies comfortably placed, and to give special injunctions to the "through" guard, respecting them; and when the train had started, carrying away and leaving behind wet eyes and smiling lips, he wondered audibly how he could reach The Chase, unless Miss Margaret would let him have a seat in the carriage.

"I started so early this morning," he said, "that I got tired sooner than usual; the game was shy too. Are you sure I shan't be in the way?"

Comfortably packed in amidst warm rugs,

the three started on their return to Clack; the tears were soon dry on the girls' cheeks, for their companion did his best to bring smiles instead, and succeeded. The short afternoon was already drawing to a close when they left Nunbriar; and a stormy sunset was fast fading from the horizon when they neared the gates of Shrugg Park, midway between the two little towns. The large house lay far back amongst the trees, but the pretty cottage which Mrs. Shrugg occupied stood within a stone's throw of the road; and its lighted windows shone cheerfully through the hoary, leafless, park trees.

"What a lonely life that poor woman must lead!" John Dale said, leaning forward to look at her house. "You see her often though now, don't you?"

"She is so kind!" said Margaret; "and papa knew her so well, you know, when they were both young."

"One very good trait in Robin Shrugg is

his attention to his mother," Johnny added; "her daughter never comes near, but he is constantly here in the shooting season."

"And she thinks him perfection," Norah said.

"An opinion he himself shares," John Dale exclaimed.

"Of course, so do we all," Margaret added. Her words made Johnny thoughtful. The light was not sufficient to show him that the seriousness of her tone was contradicted by the fun in her eyes. But his reverie was rudely dispelled,—there was a sudden snap, a lurch, and the horses were quickly pulled up.

"Holloa,—by George!" the young man cried; "there's a wheel off!"

So it was. The coachman had been careless, —the frost had been severe,—the hard, rutted country roads had quickened the mischief. Clack was two miles and a half away, night was closing in, and the carriage was useless.

"What's to be done?" said Mr. Johnny to his companions.

They proposed to walk, but that he negatived firmly: the sky threatened more snow, there was no moon, and the rough country road had no pathway. He proposed they should seek Mrs. Shrugg's hospitality, while the footman fetched work-people to repair the mischief.

"Burrows must stay with the horses, and I'll walk on and tell your people not to be afraid at your absence," he continued. "The damage can soon be repaired *pro tem.*"

"Oh, don't you go," Norah cried. "Come with us to Mrs. Shrugg's."

"I can't," he said. "You know my mother and father don't go there,—she wouldn't welcome me."

"Do take us to the door, then," cried Norah.

The cottage lay near the road as we have seen; but the boundary wall separating it

from the road was unbroken for some half a quarter of a mile farther back, and the carriage way wound round under the avenue. There was a footpath and door on Clack side, but this was kept locked. Norah did not relish the lonely walk in the twilight.

"Yes; I will do that," John Dale said.

"I am so glad you were with us," Norah continued, as they walked towards the lodge gates, and she ran forward to ring the gate bell.

John stooped to Margaret.

"Are you glad, too, Margaret?" he said in a low tone.

And to Margaret's heart came a rush and a flutter. She was no Diana now, calm and stately; but a woman with her soul in a tumult of suddenly awakened emotions. She had no voice to answer him, no self-possession to meet his inquiring eyes. Norah was back the next instant, and Johnny waited in vain for an assuring answer.

"I have a much better plan," cried Norah. "Let us borrow Mrs. Shrugg's phaeton,—then we can all go home at once."

"Shall we?" John asked again of Margaret.

"I don't know,—yes, if you like," was her answer; and her voice sounded so strange that her sister noticed it.

"Don't you feel well, Margaret?" she asked. "Are you cold, or are your chilblains hurting?"

Margaret burst into a rather unnatural laugh.

"Chilblains!" she exclaimed, "how absurd you are;" and then she began to talk unnecessarily fast.

To their consternation they found, on arriving at the cottage, Mrs. Shrugg had driven to Clack, and was still absent.

"We *must* walk now," said Margaret, on hearing this. "The ponies can't go back again directly. It is useless to wait: let us go at once."

But Mr. Dale wouldn't allow it; he insisted

on riding one of the horses to Clack, and bringing out some sort of a vehicle, while they waited; and as while they were arguing, the snow began to fall, the young ladies were obliged to agree to do as he wished.

And without saddle the young man rode *pêle mêle* over the frozen ruts, chartered a tax cart at the inn, and was back at the cottage almost before Mrs. Shrugg had returned, and welcomed the unexpected visitors and heard their story.

A very short time ago she would have visited the offences of his unfriendly parents upon young John's head, and would have delighted in keeping him waiting outside in the cold; but since she had shared in the long inexperienced family life of her husband's cousins, her hard, proud spirit had imperceptibly softened under its genial influence; and even poor Theodore was sensible of fewer snubs from her than formerly. So now, as soon as Mr. Dale's arrival was announced, she sent out a

gracious invitation for him to enter; and Mr. Johnny, feeling very awkward and deceitful, accepted it. He was soon at ease, however. Mrs. Robert Shrugg, in her own bright, pretty room, with her graceful figure unshawled, and her face lightened with an expression that was almost kindly, was a very different person to the hard, cold, proud woman, driving in loneliness, or sitting in stony indifference in church. Johnny soon felt both interest in, and sympathy for, her; and no longer blamed Mr. Francis Shrugg, as he had in his heart blamed him before he knew her, for allowing his daughters to associate with her.

In her groping movements there was claim for deepest pity; and in the deep lines of the face that had once been so beautiful, the spectator could not but read a bitter tale of suffering that surely went far to atone for her sin of the long past. Men are said to be more merciful judges of a woman's fall than her own sex are; and in the honesty of his young heart,

Johnny felt that her punishment had gone far enough in this world; and for the first time in his life wondered at his mother's obstinately continued condemnation of her fallen sister.

But on that evening, in particular, he could not have harboured unkindly thoughts of any one; for there sat Diana, glowing in the glowing firelight beneath his gaze, with eyes strangely restless, but oh! so strangely soft. And talk though they did unconcernedly, as it seemed, and with perfect indifference on perfectly indifferent subjects, yet both hearts were beating in dangerous unison, and neither realized anything but that the other was present.

Norah found them very stupid on the homeward drive.

"Do you know," she said, afterwards, to Margaret, "I've made a discovery."

Margaret listened in fear and trembling.

"I'm certain—quite certain, Mr. John Dale is in love with poor Susy, and that's why he's so attentive to us all. Didn't you notice

how much he talked about her? I wonder if she'll ever care for any one but Willy Somers? I hope not; because you see she couldn't have Johnny."

"Why not?"

Sharp as Norah was, she did not notice the anxious tone in which this was asked.

"Why of course the Dales would never let him marry her now poor papa is a shopman; besides, there is Miss Exelby."

Margaret said no more; she had entirely overlooked this prior engagement, and with its recollection there came a reaction of feeling. Johnny Dale had driven the sisters to their door, but had not gone in. On parting, Margaret had let her eyes rest for a moment on his, and he left exulting. But Mr. and Mrs. Shrugg seemed annoyed at the termination of the drive to Nunbriar.

"I won't speak to Margaret," Mrs. Francis said to her husband, "for interference might cause what we want to prevent; but people

will be sure to talk of the young man's foolish return for them, instead of coming to you and letting you fetch them home, as he should have done. Of course the most ill-natured construction will be put on it all. How odd it is we always show up the worst side of one's neighbour's doings first! I wouldn't on any account have it supposed we encouraged the young man."

"What an absurdity!" Mr. Francis exclaimed. "No one could accuse Margaret of flirting. I'm not so sure of that little Bell; but really I don't know what to think of girls now-a-days, after Linda's making such a mercenary match."

Even Linda's father misconstrued the poor little girl's attempt at self-sacrifice.

Mrs. Francis sighed. "The child looked fagged and pale," she said. "Ah! I wish they were all in the nursery still; we had none of these anxieties then."

When Johnny called next day to hope the

young ladies had not taken cold, he found Mr. Shrugg preoccupied, and by no means so cordial as usual; while Margaret avoided meeting his gaze.

He guessed the reason of the father's coolness, and liked him for it, especially as the former quietly expressed regret he should have given himself the unnecessary trouble of going back for the girls; but Margaret's change of manner perplexed as much as it troubled him. Of course he knew nothing of his mother's hint of his engagement to Grace Exelby.

Every Christmas Mr. Dale senior went to London to see the cattle-show, and his son accompanied him. The time for their visit was close, but Johnny was restless and uncomfortable, and 'seemed to shirk going.' He hunted, as usual, twice and three times a week, when the weather was open; and whether the run was east, west, north, or south, he always found his nearest way home was through Clack

High Street; draggled and bespattered, alone or with friends, Johnny's horse never failed to go very slowly past the chemist's shop. But this was not the only horse that had lately learnt to find out Clack the most convenient route to all points of the compass.

Ironstone is not more surely attractive to the lightning than is the dwelling of a pretty girl to young men; and where there is a cluster of pretty girls, the attraction is necessarily greater. Young Exelby was not the only admirer of Diana in the field; and when Diana was discovered at home, surrounded by nymphs equally charming,—nymphs sometimes to be found towards twilight seated in the bow window for the benefit of the waning light, sometimes idly talking, sometimes reading, but oftenest at work,—always neat and fresh-looking,—or in the bright mornings gardening in the old-fashioned garden, flushed and radiant with exercise, looking up with a sly glance through the thinned hedge dividing the garden

from the lane, when the sound of horses' feet told some one was passing by.

And Clack was not blind to all this.

"Just what one must expect from London girls," Miss Wright said, precisely; who would not have hesitated to beam openly upon any young man who passed her windows.

"Expect!" cried Mr. Murkitroyd, "how do you mean?"

"Well," she replied, rather taken aback by the question; "I mean,—of course, you know, —London girls are rather forward, you know— and that sort of thing."

"Hum," said the doctor; "I don't believe it."

Nor did he; but he went wrong on the same tack. He did notice that Clack saw more of the rising generation of the neighbourhood than formerly, but he supposed *Susy* was the sole object of attraction. To his mind Susy's sweet, fair womanhood was the type of perfect loveliness; her sisters were pretty girls, nothing more; and now that she suffered so sadly, alike

in mind and body, was it not natural she should be the object of universal interest and sympathy? What should he do, he asked himself, if he could only learn news of her in this way? Ah! how thankful he felt he was privileged to go in and out of her presence, as he would, without suspicion. But he was wrong again: Clack was by no means unsuspicious of his motives in remaining to work as underling to old Wright, now he had become rich and independent. To be sure, popular opinion varied as to which young lady was the reason of his continued residence in Clack; but even Crocky Clacker and Mr. Theodore had their little secrets on this matter, and believed one of their fair neighbours would be transplanted to Leeds in good time.

Mr. Theodore had long since succumbed to their charms, but there was neither bitterness nor anxiety in his passion; from Susy down to little Nelly, all created in his breast intense admiration. His was a decided case of "How happy could I be with either;" and to him it

was the most natural thing in the world for others to feel as he did. When Mr. Dale or young Exelby riding up the street saw no one in the bow window, and rode round by the lane behind, hoping the view in the garden would repay their trouble, Mr. Theodore knew what they were about, though their glances were furtive, and their manœuvres seemingly motiveless, just as well as if he had been made their confidant.

"It's most romantic," he avowed to Crocky, as they sipped hot-spiced elder wine and black beer at bedtime. "It's like a novel of thrilling interest. Our fair neighbours are as princesses of old, guarded by a dragon,—grim dragon Poverty, that has clipped their silver wings and put them into a dungeon. Our young country beaux are rescuing knights to vanquish the dragon and free the ladies."

"Oh!" said Crocky, warmed to ecstasies by the spicy wine. "Why don't you write a novel, sir? Your talk is just like a book."

Theodore put up his hand deprecatingly, but he received the compliment with evident glee.

"Is yon t' Dragon inn, at Harrogate?" the old lady cried, catching the familiar name and nothing else. "Eh, it always was a great place for t' grandees; they buttered t' hot rolls there without stint. Eh, those hot rolls was nice! Crocky, let's make some, can't we?"

The old lady's thoughts were more than ever concentrated on the grand subject of eatables just then, for Christmas was at hand; and Christmas means something more than a Church festival in Yorkshire, where digestions are as hard as their frozen roads. Clack sent up daily an odour from its ovens of such extreme savour that the inmates of barn-yards and pigsties trembled with foreboding. "Standing pies," that climax of ingenuity in pastry, fat brawn, sausages, mincemeats, puddings and cakes, were made in such quantities, that figs might well quake, and dried fruits had quite a run on them. The

carpenters were busy cutting the yule logs, which were their annual presents to their customers. The butchers had their faculties engrossed by the calculations as to how their beasts would cut up into rounds and chines and briskets. Old and young, gentry and artisan, all were bent upon preparing for and enjoying the nearing feast,—the feast of fat things. Alas! it was to most nothing solemn or suggestive; only a day on which bodily powers might be exercised beyond control,—a day with which the soul had nothing to do.

Crocodilla Clacker, like her neighbours, had her hands full. There were cakes to make,—for every caller must have a slice of cake between Christmas week, and Twelfth Day,—a good honest slice, so that if the recipient were so disposed, there would be enough to carry home, after enjoying a fair allowance at the time, wrapped in a clean pocket-handkerchief. There were standing pies to concoct to send to those benighted relatives in the south who

were supposed only to eat food fit to eat when the Christmas hamper from Clack reached them. There was brown bread to make,—that deep-coloured, gingerbread-like substance, so dear to the Yorkshire palate,—bread that must *soak* so many hours lest it should be *sad*. And then, too, there was furmenty to *crea*, wherein great skill was necessary to make the wheat tender, and yet keep it whole; and to mix it with sugar and spice that would delicately flavour without giving a decided taste. Yet with all this Crocodilla was indefatigable in her attendance on poor suffering Susy.

Her jelly and mutton-broth and eggless rice-puddings were the only things the invalid's appetite fancied; and her cheerful, commonplace conversation was just suitable for one who was in danger of morbidly brooding on her trial.

And Susy lay and listened to histories of cakes and pies, and wondered inwardly whether the time would ever come when the aching of her heart and the pain of her body

would cease, and she would live to be interested in what now seemed petty, inconsequential, every-day doings.

"She bears it beautifully," every one said, in allusion to her calm sweet manner. But no one knew of the bitter tears and the constant cries for help to support her, with which in those weary days and nights the poor girl besieged Heaven; nor how sharp was the conflict between despair and trust. But trust in Almighty love triumphed, as it always will, no matter how hard the burden nor how sore the wound. And Susy never grudged her lover's death: she only grieved for her own loss in him; for Willy Somers had gone in the first bloom of his earnest, honest manhood, with an untarnished name; and Susy could trust and believe he was safe in a happier home than even her love could have made him.

CHAPTER XI.

BUILT ON SAND.

MR. POLKELY SETON went to the Great Northern Station to meet his wife, with the firm determination to let her see he was pretty offended by her independent behaviour, and quite resolved to resent it; and as Linda neared the platform, and saw him standing there grimmer and more upright, if possible, than ever, she felt nervously anxious as to the reception she would receive. No kindling of his eyes, no relaxing of the deep lines round his mouth were apparent as he handed her out of the train; and yet his heart was beating with the pleasure of seeing her again. Luckily Linda did not show her fear; but the moment her feet touched the platform, she raised her face to be kissed, and said smilingly, "Oh, we are so glad to get here,"—

simply meaning they were so glad to come to the end of their long, cold journey; a construction which Mr. Seton happily misunderstood.

"So I should think," he replied, meeting the fresh, red lips more than half way; and believing she was glad to get away from her own poor relations back to his luxurious home, he could not remember one word of the dignified rebuke he had been treasuring up to give her.

Bell, too, had a gracious welcome; and Bell, too, held up her face for a sisterly salute. After all, Mr. Seton found himself in his easy, warm carriage, unable to say an unkind word to either of his pretty companions, and only eager to have them comfortably sheltered by his own hearth. He considered himself weakly generous, though, in keeping silence on his wife's wilful conduct. But though his indignation was bribed into silence for the present, it only slumbered, and was by no means vanquished altogether.

Bell was in an eager state of excitement and delight. She was in London once more, and any moment might bring her in contact with the knight of her day dreams, Mr. Frederick Lington. Miss Emily Clayton brought his name forward on her first visit.

"Well, Bell," she said, "you don't ask after Fred Lington,—and you used to adore him,—you did."

At which plain speaking the twins both blushed,—Linda angrily, but Bell quietly.

"Lor'!" Miss Emily continued, "what babies you two are yet; every one adores Fred,—I'm sure I do; he wears such ducks of ties, he does. If he had any money, I'd be downright spoony on him. Wouldn't pa' be angry! What fun it would be! But, you know, really now I am half determined to have him as it is."

"Emily is more vulgar than ever," Bell said, when their old friend went away; "she thinks because she's so rich, she can marry any one.

Why, she must be five years older than Mr. Lington."

"So she could," Linda replied to the first part of her sister's remarks; "and I dare say he would give worlds to catch her."

Bell smiled,—a little knowing smile,—her stock of worldly wisdom was as yet very small.

Mr. Seton was quite curious about Captain Robin Shrugg's intimacy with Bell. He related to her the anecdote of the young man's mistake at the theatre; and even questioned his wife whether she fancied the young people had a fancy for each other.

Linda couldn't say; she agreed with her husband it would be a very good match, but she knew nothing about its likelihood. And then Mr. Seton thought he ought to show some civility to his wife's relations, and invited the captain to a grand dinner party. And the captain came, and electrified all the middle-aged, steady guests by his ceaseless

rattle of small talk, and his wonderfully elaborate dress; but Mr. Seton never told his wife why he had invited him at that particular time, nor the conclusion that he had arrived at, which was that neither Bell nor Robin were on more than friendly terms.

To say the truth, Mr. Seton had determined to try to get his sister-in-law properly married,—according to his estimate of a proper marriage. Could she be settled near her sister it would be desirable, as unfortunately he despaired of breaking Linda from loving her family. To have one of the family, therefore, near at hand, in a good position, would not only look well in the eyes of the world, but would be pleasant to Linda; and he magnanimously determined to bring about some such a settlement, and in default of Robin Shrugg, Mr. Mowlam seemed a very suitable *parti*.

"Mowlam admires Bell's playing wonderfully," he said to his sister, Mrs. Burcham,

who had been recalled home on business. "I'm not sure he doesn't admire the young lady wonderfully also."

The little widow stared at her brother, and then laughed sarcastically.

"Why, he's as old as you are!" she cried.

"I'm quite aware of it," he answered; "and Miss Bell is the same age as my wife."

"Oh, to be sure! I beg your pardon," she replied, with another provoking laugh; "but I suspect Mowlam isn't so sentimental as you are,—he likes money more than beauty, I expect."

"I fancy I know him better than you do," said Mr. Seton. "I never thought him a marrying man, I confess; but he certainly showed great interest in Bell's rendering of Meyerbeer in B."

"I wonder you are not all tired of fiddling," she exclaimed. "But now, Jason, don't lend yourself to matchmaking. Mowlam's old enough to choose for himself. Don't try to

make a goose of him. I am a more suitable wife for him than that little girl, Bell."

"Harriet!" said her brother with dignity, "I wish you would try to reflect before you speak." Upon which the widow laughed merrily again, and wished she had a little of her brother's sobriety.

Mr. Seton changed the subject; he always found himself worsted in argument with his sister.

"Well," he said, as he took leave, "I am glad you have come back. I shall be glad if you will look after my young ladies. I shall be very busy for the next two months, and I don't like two such good-looking persons going about together."

"Thank you for nothing; but I won't play duenna even to please you. Neither am I so very old as to frighten the men away," she answered.

"Oh the vanity of my poor sister!" Mr. Seton mentally exclaimed, as he left her house.

"I really believe she entertains the preposterous notion of being eligible for a second marriage yet!"

The twins soon found out why Mr. Seton was always eulogizing his old friend, and continually inviting him to the house; and I regret to say they enjoyed the idea as a good joke. Bell sketched him ridiculously in her home letters; and while she professed to listen to his opinions, and express her unfeigned admiration of his musical performances, she was laying up caricatured material for further epistles; for though Susy continued very ill, and William Somers lay dead in his far-off grave, Bell's youthful spirits had risen above all trouble, and Linda's life was thereby rendered happy once more.

Mr. Seton thought he saw all things progressing according to his wishes, and was at ease, till one eventful evening when Bell met Mr. Lington at a dance.

Frederick Lington plays too small a part

in this little history to require a lengthened description: it will be enough to say he was one of the many Government clerks who, on almost nominal salaries, manage to be always well dressed, and always smiling; who go everywhere, and seemingly deny themselves nothing in the shape of luxury and amusement; who ride good horses, and are as well up in every expensive hobby as their associates who have thousands a year. To be sure these young men have an ephemeral existence, but they usually disappear,—unless they make good marriages,—without any ugly rumours, and often appear again years hence solid and portly elderly gentlemen. The poor curate and the struggling barrister, on as small incomes, can scarcely avoid showing tatters, and vainly seek to hide their hungry expressions; but the gay young clerk covers his troubles with finest broadcloth, and feasts with Dives every day.

When Bell saw once more the splendidly macassared whiskers and marvellously tucked

shirt front of Mr. Frederick Lington, her silly little heart beat with intense happiness, her bright eyes became suddenly shy, and for the life of her she could not lift them above that spotless white tie which was so wonderfully like biscuit china. Bell and Linda were making a sensation with their fresh young beauty, and Mr. Lington was by no means backward to claim them as old acquaintances. Linda however gave him no encouragement; but Bell went off with him to join the dance, with so beaming a countenance that her brother-in-law questioned Linda about him; and hearing how small his means were, kept a careful watch on his movements. Once, twice, three times did Bell dance with him; and once they were downstairs in the refreshment-room for twenty minutes. Mr. Seton would not have been alarmed had he heard their conversation. *He* would have known, though Bell did not know, that Mr. Lington's compliments would have been neither so broad

nor so plentiful had his heart been touched. But Mr. Seton heard nothing; he only noticed the girl's face flush, and the young man's eyes bent admiringly. However, he said not a word of his annoyance, only he took the young ladies home at a very early hour.

"I'm sorry you like him, Bell," Linda said, when they were able to be alone again. "Susy and Margaret always called him a flirt."

"Oh yes!" cried Bell, indignantly. "Of course Susy only cared for Willy Somers,—poor Willy," she added with sudden regret; "and, you know, Margaret is so very high and mighty, she doesn't care for any young man."

"I wonder if Margaret will ever care for any one?" Linda said.

"No," Bell rejoined. "Why, fancy, she's nearly twenty, and has never been in love. She's sure to be an old maid. But he's not a bit of a flirt," Bell continued; "of course I could tell,—any one can tell when a person is

serious; and he spoke so kindly about us all,—about you too, Linda."

"Well," Linda said, "of course I shall like him for your sake, darling; but—he can't have anything but his salary, I'm afraid."

"That's nothing against him, poor fellow!" Bell exclaimed. "I'd much rather rise with my husband gradually. You know *I* know how to be economical, so it will be no hardship to me. And I think it must be so nice when one grows old, to remember and talk over the struggles gone through together—it must be such a bond of union between husband and wife."

"Yes," said Linda, with a sigh, "of course money isn't everything."

"So you saw Fred Lington last night," said Miss Clayton, who broke in on their *tête à tête*.

"Who told you so?" was Bell's exclamation.

"Who? why he did to be sure. He's always at our house—he is: comes to ask pa's advice, perhaps. I'm sure I don't encourage him."

And she laughed consciously, or as Bell thought, affectedly.

"He thinks you've grown fat, Bell," Miss Clayton continued. "He's such fun,—he is."

"As if any one cares for his opinion," cried Bell, with spirit. "You seem on very intimate terms, Emily."

"Lor'! I knew him when I couldn't see his mustaches without a dark paper behind it to throw it out. Years I've known him,—a long time, I have; he's a regular duck, he is, when he's got up regardless."

Mrs. Burcham made herself very agreeable to her young sister-in-law. She would not stay at Hyde Park Gardens though, nor give an opinion on domestic matters there, excepting when she was quite sure it would agree with the young ladies. Mr. Mowlam's suit did not progress on the evenings the lively widow spent at her brother's; for she seemed to take a malicious delight in calling his attention from the piano, where Bell sat a close prisoner.

"She's a dear old thing!" Bell said. "Mr. Seton looks as if he could box her ears sometimes."

And Mr. Seton *was* very angry with his sister one day about this time. He had asked her to dine, and accompany them to the theatre afterwards. Mr. Mowlam was also to be of the party; but just as they were starting, a telegram had come on business demanding Mr. Seton's immediate attention. He therefore was obliged to let them proceed to the play without him. What was his horror, when he joined them afterwards, to find his party augmented by two young men,—Captain Robin and Mr. Lington,—who were making themselves uncommonly agreeable to the young ladies; while Mrs. Burcham and Mr. Mowlam sat in the background, absorbed in themselves.

"It was a distressing exhibition!" Mr. Seton said to Linda. "But I cannot say as much as I feel to you and Bell, because my own sister,—an elderly person and a widow,—misbehaved a

flagrantly as you did; but if I am to have the pleasure of seeing you in society, I must emphatically protest against any further licence of conduct towards the opposite sex."

"You must be careful, darling," poor Linda said to Bell, after this. "You know it is natural he should consider Mr. Lington an ineligible husband, dear. When we are as old as he is, and have had as much experience, I dare say we shall have the same ideas."

"I hope not," Bell answered; but she was too prudent to say anything further against Linda's husband to Linda. That taking for better or for worse was a reality to all the Shruggs, and not to be lightly regarded.

And Bell was careful; for at a ball given by Miss Clayton, she showed so much less pleasure than usual on greeting Mr. Lington, that the young man was piqued into saying more tender things than he by any means meant. Mr. Lington had a double motive in being particularly attentive that night. He wished Miss

Clayton to see his influence over the prettiest girl in the room; and he did feel kinder towards Bell than towards any woman he had ever known. "But a poor devil like me can't afford to marry for love," was his favourite saying when accused of paying too much attention to penniless beauties; and in saying this he firmly believed he was exonerated from any dishonourable motive.

Bell could not resist his words and looks; she let him detain her at the conservatory and in the refreshment room, and Mr. Seton had to seek her when it was time to go home. He found her at last sitting on the stairs; and when she obeyed his decidedly angry summons, she showed neither fear nor contrition. She was beyond that: she was in that blissful state of supreme happiness that is so transient,—that period before,—just before the irrevocable words are spoken, when they seem very near the lips, when certainty and uncertainty are hand-in-hand,—sure,—and still tantalizing by

the improbable but possible obstacles that might arise to prevent them. Mr. Seton might have scolded, and Bell would not have cared; she believed herself beloved and chosen, and the belief made her unconscious of, and certainly callous to, all besides. In all but the formal question and answer she considered herself engaged to marry Frederick Lington; and she sat silently considering her great happiness as they drove the short distance from Sussex Gardens, hardly hearing how her brother-in-law sneered down Linda's commentaries on the success of the ball.

Mr. Seton said nothing to Bell, but he told Linda he would countenance no more "of that kind of thing;" by which the sisters understood he would allow them to go to no more promiscuous gatherings where such young men as Mr. Lington were to be met with.

Bell laughed at the threat. Next day she knew a letter would come settling all doubt; and she owed no subjection to any one but her

parents, she said, defiantly. Mr. Seton could say nothing more, when once her father consented to her engagement. And all the next day the twins spent in a highly excited state, looking for that letter which never was to come.

But Bell's spirits suffered very little from the disappointment, for she was engaged to spend the following evening with Miss Clayton; and her hopeful imagination quickly took another turn to suit existing circumstances.

"He'll be there too, of course," she said. "Don't you see he'll bring us home, Linda,—and then!—" and she blushed up radiantly, happy at the thought.

When Bell came into the library, ready to start for Sussex Gardens, to keep her engagement at the Claytons, Mr. Seton, who was standing with his back to the fire, as carefully dressed as if he expected company, exclaimed, as if in a continuation of a previous remark,—

"I do not wish to interfere with family

friendships; but I must say I do not consider Miss Clayton a desirable companion for you."

Just then Bell *loved* Emily Clayton, because it was through her she was about to be made, as she believed, "happy for ever after," and she could not hear this speech in silence.

"Her mother was mamma's friend," she cried, with much more spirit than was necessary, "Emily goes everywhere, and knows every one; no one can say a word against her."

"No," he replied sarcastically; "Lindley Murray could be the only man to complain of unkind treatment at her hands."

The twins looked at each other and laughed. Emily's grammar was decidedly questionable. So after all Bell went merrily off; and as her radiant young face, and soft white draperies passed from the room, Linda fancied half the light went too.

"She's a pretty young woman," Mr. Seton said, as they heard the front door close upon her. "She must make a prudent marriage."

"Yes," said Linda, meekly; and all through the long ceremonious dinner, she was thinking of her sister's coming happiness, and unconsciously envying her lot.

Bell ran up stairs when she reached Sussex Gardens, as a privileged guest, to announce herself, knowing she was early enough to find Emily alone in the drawing-room, and have a chat with her before Mr. Clayton came down from his dressing-room.

The drawing-room door was ajar; and Bell saw, as she ran over the noiseless stairs, there was as yet no light there but from a glowing fire. Unnoticed, she passed on through the side-room, thinking how bright and cosy the glow was on the gilded pannelling, the glistening chandeliers, the large mirrors, and glistening polish. She was evidently the first guest, for all was quiet in the larger room; and as she stood for a second in the curtained archway, she failed to see the inner room was occupied. One step farther—one hasty remark overheard—

one glance at the sofa beside the hearth—and swiftly to Bell's fluttering heart came a blow that in an instant shattered her bright dreams for ever. For on the sofa, hand in hand, staring at each other with that unmistakable inane stare that only lovers can assume, sat Miss Clayton and Frederick Lington, and the words that fell so heavily on Bell's ear were,—

"Oh, you are a duck,—you are!" in the lady's most caressing tone.

"Lor', Bell!" cried Emily, standing up with an affected scream of alarm. "Is it you? Well, I never; and I'm not dressed for dinner. Sit down and talk to Fred till I'm ready."

And Bell found herself standing, scared and rigid, at one end of the hearthrug, while Mr. Lington stood at the other end, hardly daring to breathe.

Bell knew how it had all come about in an instant,—knew she had been fooled and trifled with; and the knowledge acted as a restorative. She could not all at once hide

the consciousness of her defeat; but she was able to crush back the girlish tears that seemed choking her, and to assume a calmness that imposed upon her false lover.

Mr. Lington spoke first; and, to do him justice, his emotion was very real, though his words appeared brave.

"I suppose you're not surprised at this," he said. "I've been trying it on a long time; but the governor only consented to-day."

And Bell made herself answer,—

"Yes!"

The sound of her voice reassured him; there was evidently to be no scene.

Then he crossed the space between them, and held out his hand.

"You'll wish me luck, won't you?" he asked.

But Bell had limits to her long-suffering, and she shrank from before him and sat down on a low stool within the shadow of the chimney-piece, without accepting his offered grasp.

"We are all old friends of Emily's," she said, ignoring his request; "she deserves to be happy." This little remark cut both ways; but it was a spontaneous utterance, for Bell was not sufficiently herself to be sarcastic.

Mr. Lington's conscience applied it against himself, and it stung him. He had been prepared for tears and expostulations; they would have gratified his vanity, though he had dreaded them; and this apparent calm irritated him more than the bitterest reproaches would have done. The entrance of Mr. Clayton prevented him retaliating, and he hastily retreated to his former seat.

"How quiet you are!" Mr. Clayton exclaimed. "Well, Bell, what do you think of our news? They have my consent without my approval, I tell them. But Emily has had her own way ever since her poor mother died; so I was obliged to give in, whether I liked or no."

Mr. Clayton was as outspoken as his daughter; and during dinner, notwithstanding

the presence of "the servants," Bell had to hear their plans and opinions discussed, and to give her ideas on matters connected with the marriage.

Bell seemed to be in a feverish dream. There was a singing in her ears, a muddled feeling in her mind, a numbness in her pulses. Yet she ate and drank and talked and laughed, wondering all the time if she should be able to keep up till the evening was over. And Emily went on making love to Frederick, and grimacing and laughing; and Frederick, glancing from his full-blown bride elect to the sparkling face of his rejected love, had already began his punishment. Bell had never looked fresher and prettier than she looked that night. The trouble in her heart had not had time to dim her youthful beauty.

"Tell you what," said Mr. Clayton confidentially to his future son-in-law as they sat over their wine after the ladies had gone up stairs; "those girls of poor Shrugg's are all

pretty; but that little creature, Bell, with her rosy lips and saucy eyes, is the prettiest of the lot, to my mind. She'll marry well."

"Ah!" said Mr. Frederick; and he tossed off a glass of sherry without at all enjoying its flavour.

Upstairs, Bell had to listen to Emily's account of all the obstacles that had attended Frederick's suit; also the exact words of the proposals, of which Mr. Lington had made four, before Miss Clayton could make up her mind to make her papa consent.

"You never believed he meant anything." She wound up with, "He flirted with you shockingly; didn't he? But oh! he is so handsome,—he is. You can't wonder; he must have his fling."

Bell did her best to answer properly; and luckily Miss Emily was content to do all the talking herself. When the gentlemen joined them, the buzzing in Bell's head increased; and when at last Mrs. Polkely Seton's maid

and footman were announced, as having "fetched Miss Shrugg," she started up, feeling she could bear to restrain her feelings no longer.

"Lor'!" cried Emily; "ain't you kept in order, just! Fancy a maid and a man too. That's old Seton's fussiness, of course. So you daren't wait a minute. Well; Frederick must take you home,—he must."

"No, no," cried Bell.

But the Claytons insisted; and Bell walked downstairs as if resigned to her fate. But the instant they were outside the door, and Mr. Lington, with a well-assumed smile of delight, placed himself at her side, all her composure fled; the reaction had come, and Bell was no longer able to control herself. With an exclamation that startled her companion, she took to her heels, and in a second was far ahead.

To run after her was a proceeding Mr. Lington's dignity would not suffer, especially as both man and maid had already started in

quick pursuit. So he stood for an instant till he saw the young lady had turned the corner, and then went on towards his own home. Emily never knew of this little *contretemps;* and Mr. Seton's servants saw in it a good joke, and admired their young lady for playing it off on such a conceited young man, who, as the footman said, was "nothing but a hunder-paid clerk."

As for Bell, the quick run through the sharp night air brought back her senses, the delirium flew away as she rushed onward; and though her limbs ached as she drew up at Mr. Seton's door, the dull beating in her head was over, and she could think clearly.

The too-tooting of Mr. Seton's flageolet, and Linda's dreary accompaniment, stopped as she entered, and a glad smile of welcome overspread Linda's face. Bell felt the full value of that affectionate smile for the first time in her life; and it comforted her inexpressibly to be thus reminded how dear she was to some

one yet. She saw, too, what a relief her interruption was; for the tired look on Linda's face was very apparent when first Bell entered.

Mr. Seton graciously hoped his sister-in-law had enjoyed herself; and Linda tried to question her with her eyes.

"Thank you," Bell replied, evading both questioners; "but I'm very tired; I had no idea it was so late."

Linda, however, followed her to her room, and impatiently begged to hear all particulars.

"I'd rather tell you to-morrow," Bell pleaded; "I am so tired, dear."

"Just tell me this, then," cried Linda; "was he there?"

"Yes," said Bell.

"And he walked home with you?"

"No."

"O Bell! why not?"

"I wouldn't let him."

"Bell! Why, what is it?"

For Bell's voice had become unsteady.

"O Linda!" cried the girl, unable any longer to stem the long pent-up agony. "Oh! what shall I do? He is going to marry Emily."

Linda sprang to her sister's side; and as the latter gave way to an overpowering burst of tears, she put her strong young arms tightly round her, as if to shield her from all harm. Linda had no eloquent argument at her command. She could think of nothing to say, indeed, but "Never mind love; never mind: he's not worth grieving for." But her hearty kisses, her clinging embrace, and her sympathising tears were more soothing than many words could have been.

Gradually Bell sobbed out all her story; and then Linda caressed and comforted her again, as a tender mother caresses a weary child. And Bell sank into a deep sleep, and forgot her troubles for a while.

Mr. Seton was in bed when his wife returned to her room.

"I must beg you will not sit up talking with

your sister in this highly unseasonable manner," he exclaimed; "you have all the day for talking. I really can't understand what you can have to say."

"I was hearing some news," Linda said; "Miss Clayton and Mr. Lington are going to marry."

"The woman's worse than a fool!" Mr. Seton cried, raising his nightcapped head to enforce his words. "However, it's no business of mine, I'm glad to say. And,—pray what does Bell think of this? I should hope she now regrets her indecorous flirtation with him?"

"Bell," replied Linda, hesitatingly, "is surprised too. Will you be so kind as not to mention it before her? I am afraid she rather believed all his nonsense."

"The fellow should be horsewhipped," Mr. Seton exclaimed. "I'll horsewhip him, by George, I will. It serves Bell right. *I* knew how it would be; *I* cautioned her; but of course she knew best."

"No, no," said Linda, earnestly; "you must take no notice, dear, in any way." She spoke affectionately, for his unexpected chivalry pleased her. "These things are best let alone."

"What do you know about it?" he asked, smiling at her unusually kind words. "You never went through anything of the sort;" and he looked keenly at her.

But Linda's steady gaze had no need to flinch.

"No," she said, innocently. "I was never in love with any one; but I've read all about it."

Bell fought bravely with her rebellious heart; but for the present, at least, she was miserable. Captain Robin meeting her a few days after her trouble came upon her, noticed how ill she was looking.

"No bad news, I hope?" he asked. "You don't look like yourself, young lady."

Bell did not laugh. "No; no bad news from home," she said. "One can't always be in the height of glee."

Captain Robin shook his head. "No;" he answered, "I suppose we all have our sober moods. I have especially, just now. My father wants me to sell out and look after the property. I don't care to grow mouldy yet awhile."

Bell was roused and interested. "Then you'd settle down at The Park?" she exclaimed. "Well, I think your father is right; why should you follow any profession?"

"The next thing would be," continued the captain moodily; "I should have to marry, and really I cannot make up my mind to that."

Bell laughed almost heartily.

"Don't be afraid," she said; "perhaps everyone would refuse you."

"No such luck," said he. "I'm not a conceited fellow," added the little man, pulling down his wristbands to show his diamond links; "but I know I'm a good catch,—you understand, eh!"

"But," Bell replied, "you wouldn't marry a

girl who only cared for your position, would you ?"

"Oh, no. I'm awfully particular, you know, or I should have been snapped up long ago. I must have some money when I marry. You ladies are so extravagant in dress and wine nowadays, that a mere squire, who likes to keep his hounds and have a few good horses in his stables, has no chance to indulge his own little tastes if he has a penniless wife. And, do you know, cousin Bell, I always notice the penniless wives give themselves the most airs! I take it they don't know the value of money, you know."

"Oh, no;" cried Bell. "Look at Linda, for instance, she doesn't give herself airs."

Mrs. Polkely Seton was standing on the other side of the large room, with her hand on her husband's arm, talking to some elderly gentlemen, who all looked rich and complaisant. Linda's gown of the richest blue silk, draped with costly white lace, her fair soft neck and

arms sparkling with pearls and diamonds, were no apt illustration of economy; but her modest, kindly bearing, certainly proved the absence of *airs*.

"By George," said the captain, energetically, "that old Seton is a lucky dog; but then, you see, she's a Shrugg, and that sort of thing's nothing new to her. *You* wouldn't be puffed up, either, would you, if you married a fellow like me?"

"No;" she exclaimed with genuine mirth. "No, indeed, I shouldn't."

"Well, I might do worse," he added admiringly. "Tell you what, cousin Bell, you've got all the beauty of the family on your side of the house."

"We didn't get any from the Shruggs," she retorted.

"Conceited little ape!" she said afterwards to Linda. "I daresay he thinks I would have him."

Emily Clayton was cruel enough to ask Bell

to be her bridesmaid, for the wedding was to come off almost immediately. But Bell thought there was no occasion to put herself to unnecessary pain, and absolutely declined; thereby gratifying Mr. Seton so much, that he bought her a handsome bracelet, to signify her complete restoration to his favour.

"I'm glad it is to your taste," he said, as she exclaimed with girlish vehemence at its beauty. "Now go and practice like a good girl; Mowlam will bring his flute to-night. We'll try a quartett if you please."

Mr. Mowlam eulogized Bell's playing that evening very much; and Mrs. Burcham, who was also spending the evening in Hyde Park Gardens, smilingly nodded her approval too. Mr. Mowlam proposed having the pleasure of presenting Miss Shrugg with a bound copy of Beethoven's Sonatas, and Mrs. Burcham said it was a very nice idea of his. Mr. Seton meanwhile looked almost beaming as Bell blushingly uttered her thanks; but he resented his sister's

continual interference, and looked at her crossly for persisting in sharing the conversation. But he was downright angry when her carriage was announced, and she asked Mr. Mowlam to let her drive him as far as their ways lay together.

She went off downstairs on the old bachelor's arm, smirking at her brother, who followed savagely.

Linda softly clapped her hands, and danced lightly round a chair.

"Don't you see?" she cried; "she means to have him herself. Oh, I am so glad; you will be free!"

"Free!" Bell exclaimed; "do you think any one could make me marry unless I chose? and now I shall never choose!"

The two girls exchanged deep sighs at what these last words implied; but Linda nevertheless doubted whether her sister would have dared to refuse a suitor backed by Mr. Seton.

CHAPTER XII.

DIANA.

WHILE Bell mused on broken hearts and base deceivers, and believed her hopes were blighted for ever and her affections withered, and the canker-worm of sorrow had taken deep, undying hold upon her heart,—as young people of both sexes like to fancy when Joan proves a flirt, and John loves and rides away,—there was a truer and stronger contest between love and duty going on in another sister's heart up in wintry Yorkshire.

The new year had come, and the short days were colder and darker than were even the proverbially cold, dark days before Christmas. Clack folk looked dyspeptic and blue: the reaction after the festivities of Yule-tide was hard for their digestions and spirits to bear

patiently; even the Shruggs, who had scarcely shared in their neighbours' gaieties, looked out of health.

Mr. Shrugg had an anxious mind — the shop's accounts were bad; he had been generously unwilling to put himself forward as a rival to the other druggist, and he had also proved himself a careless book-keeper: inexperience is a deadly enemy to talent, and with all his talent Mr. Francis Shrugg knew he was a child in the art of bread winning. He had stocked his shop with the best and most expensive drugs, and the majority of his customers preferred old Clacker's pungent doses and cheap and nasty nostrums. He had shrunk from serving in the shop; and his shopman being a sentimental young man, who imitated all the weaknesses, and possessed none of the sense, of Mr. Theodore, was not a favourite and the custom, which had begun to decline in old Jeremiah's time, had already further fallen away. It was a dark look-out for Mr. Francis,

who spent many a dark hour, mentally and practically, in the long back room where his grandfather's black oak cabinet stood amidst deepening shadows. But he said nothing upstairs of all his doubt and anxiety; how could he add to the lines on his wife's forehead as she sat by poor Susy's side engrossed with fear lest the poor blighted girl should never regain her strength? Rarely would Mrs. Shrugg leave her place by Susy; she had a dozen excuses for remaining there; and Norah was almost as reluctant to be out of hearing of any wish Susy might express. Norah was nearly as thin and pale as the invalid; she was growing fast, and her active mind fretted her body. She alone of all the family noticed her father's depression of spirits, and guessed they were caused by other than pure anxiety on Susy's account.

Girls of fifteen and sixteen are rarely engrossed with self: they like to think and act for others; they are curious on the feelings and

habits of those around them; they notice everything, and imagine much; their age is the interregnum between inexperience and the vast, far-reaching upland, whose untried roads may lead to the most dazzling country, or to the deepest pit. The deep river on eternity's shore is still to them veiled in the morning's mist; they have no past trials to daunt them, and consequently no dread of what lies before them. They know many have been wretched, but they mean to be happy and great; they will avoid temptation, and strike out a new way for themselves,—and thus Norah thought. She would be the means of raising her family. To be sure, she had been the means of laying Susy low enough, but she would make compensation. She meant to be a great chemist; her sex would but increase the marvel; and to attain this end she toiled in secret over her father's chemical books, and had already begun to experimentalize whenever her father was out of doors. Seated at his desk, she found num-

berless scraps of paper with bewildering calculations, and it needed but little discernment to comprehend the reason of his gloom. The weekly ledger made all plain, and Norah's anxiety was too much for her. Yet she would make all right, she thought, by-and-by. Even little Nelly was sick and low with cold and chilblains. Margaret alone flourished as of old.

No; more than as of old. Cold and sorrow and gloom seemed to beautify and brighten her. Old Mr. Dale declared her to be the handsomest woman in Yorkshire, where handsome women are matters of course. He delighted to put her on his best hunters, and show her off in the field. He always called her Diana, and was constantly pointing out her grace, and repeating her sayings to his son. Johnny joked his father about being bewitched, and bade his mother beware of a cup of cold poison. Mrs. Dale was amused by her husband's ardour, and her son's cool-

ness. It was pleasant to her to have a young girl brightening them all with her gay spirits; her fears for Johnny slumbered; she had implicit trust in Diana's pride, and believed that the self-respect that kept Margaret from accepting all the gifts her friends would have given her, and that made her wary of encouraging the undisguised admiration that followed her in the hunting-field, would prevent any toleration of Johnny's love-like regards, were he ever disposed to offer any. But proud Diana was already vanquished; the hitherto cold heart was aflame with a fervour that shone out of her limpid eyes, and gave that additional lustre to her beauty which Mr. Dale was persuaded was owing solely to his bracing native breezes.

Matter of fact, commonplace Clack, knew the secret, and discussed the probability of its success over its winter greens and ham.

Diana had struggled hard before she succumbed to this softening influence. How

many a cold look could John Dale tell of?—how many a perverse word had for a moment dashed his hopes to the ground? Once, twice, thrice she had told him she would never yield,—had vowed she would never let a man stoop to marry her; and as she spoke had held herself erect, like an empress, prouder and colder than Diana herself. Over and over again was she responsible for fits of gloom on John Dale's bright spirit,—moods of surly silence and unfriendly incivility, at which people wondered, and could not decipher the cause,—but how could she hold out altogether?

In these dark afternoons, when Susan lay dozing, and the shadowed house was hushed in unnatural quiet, and Margaret knew there was a longing heart waiting and hoping on the solitary country road,—was it possible for her to remain in the gloomy garden, where the dank vegetables drooped in the chill air, and the skeleton apple-trees whispered in the snow-laden wind? A few resolute

turns up and down between the house with its closed, old-fashioned windows, and the garden door that led to love and Johnny,—and then the temptation was resisted no longer. With flushing face and hurried steps she would open and close the door behind her; and during the accidental meeting sure to follow, Margaret's pride ebbed lower and lower, till Johnny had heard all he wished to hear, and knew she was his captive at last.

Once or twice they met Mr. Murkitroyd, who trotted past without stopping to speak; and next time Margaret had to encounter him at home, she felt as she had never in her life felt before,—guilty and fearful; but Mr. Murkitroyd, if he thought anything, said nothing. He had his own little secret that he would not have published for all the world,—why should he place his own glasshouse in jeopardy by stoning theirs?

"What keeps you so long in Clack?" Mrs.

Dale had asked the rich man. "Love for your practice, or your partner's daughter?"

"The latter, to be sure," laughed he. "No, really; I suppose I'm like a cat, and can't quit the locality. Besides, Leeds isn't a lively place, you know; but I shall go there some day, and become a first-rate man of business."

"Get a wife first," said Mrs. Dale.

Old Mrs. Clacker gave him the same advice.

"Ay, but you should tek a wife," said she. "Yon Miss Marg'ret Shroogg is t' lass for you, sir; she'd look some'at like a' top of your fine table now you've gotten a mint o' money."

Miss Crocodilla looked knowingly at the smiling doctor.

"You're too late, sir, I reckon, i' that quarter."

Mr. Murkitroyd grinned, but held his tongue. He'd no objection to hear gossip; but he never propagated any.

"Ah, ah!" Mr. Theodore cried, "women's orbs, women's orbs,—what is hidden from

them? Well; whoever cultivates our beauteous neighbour in the garden of his affections, will have an ever-springing rose,—a jewel of finest calibre,—a perennial fountain of purest ether,—an everflowing draught of mead and nectar!"

The old lady caught at the word draught.

"Ay," she cried, "let's have a sup o' some'at to drink somebody's health. Doctor, I' sure you needs be hungry."

Then Mr. Theodore wanted to know how Susy was,—was there any chance of her soon getting off her sofa.

The doctor drank some raspberry brandy before he answered. He only said,—

"It isn't professional to reveal the secrets of the shop. Miss Shrugg has two mighty qualities in favour of recovery,—youth and patience."

"They ought to be up at T' Park," cried the old woman. "Jerry telled me only t'other day t' old squire was coming round. He never

talked o' Mr. Francis for years; but he cooms and mags about him in t' little back room there. I mind Mr. Robert 'll find himself in t' wrong box mebbe, after all."

Her mind was back in the past; no one made any remark upon her words.

"It's a queer world," said the doctor, rising to go.

As he entered the street, Mrs. Dale's carriage drew up.

"You're the very man I want," cried the owner, thrusting her bright face out of the window. "I want you to come to dinner to-night. I am going to carry off a young lady, I hope, and you must come and help to amuse her."

"Oh, that's your little game!" thought he, after accepting her invitation. "Fancy me cutting out Dale, with his fine manners and landed estate. I thought you were sharper than that, my lady."

Mrs. Dale had just such a little game in her

mind. She liked and admired both Dr. Murkitroyd and Margaret Shrugg, and would be delighted to be the means of making them man and wife. She hinted this much to her husband and son before she started to Clack: the one had pronounced it a brilliant idea; the other had shouted in derision.

"Diana an apothecary's wife!" cried young John Dale.

"She's a chemist's daughter now," said his mother.

"Stuff!" Mr. John exclaimed.

"Murkitroyd's a thorough good fellow," his father exclaimed, "and he'll be one of the richest men in the Riding when his father dies. Diana would soon give him all he wants,—a little polish."

"So he is a good fellow," said John, all the more heartily because he knew he would never be his rival.

He followed his mother to Clack, and joined her in the bow-windowed room of the old

dower house. He had remembered Margaret had declared she could not visit his mother again while their secret engagement lasted. It was all the pride left her; she could not accept kindness from his parents till she was assured it would be continued when they knew all. And Johnny quite meant to tell them all—but visitors and visiting had prevented him hitherto, and to say the truth, the young man enjoyed the stolen sweets, and hesitated to break the romantic charm of secrecy; and though he was not one whit afraid of his parents, yet he knew well enough such a marriage would disappoint them greatly.

Margaret managed to turn her face away from curious eyes when she greeted her lover; but he saw the sparkle that flew to her eyes, and appreciated the tremor in her hand as it lay in his tight grasp.

As he feared, she was excusing herself from visiting the Hall. She was wanted at home, etc., etc.

Mrs. Dale attacked Mrs. Shrugg to use her authority. John turned to the music-stand, and took up a piece hap-hazard.

"Is this new?" he said, making the appeal direct to Margaret without going towards her, so that she was obliged to go to him before she could answer.

It was "Rule Britannia," and she could not help laughing at his ruse.

"You will come?" he said, stooping amongst the music he had purposely let fall.

"No," she answered.

"To please me, Margaret,—my Margaret, you must,—just this once. Say yes; do!"

Of course she gave in.

That very evening the veil fell from Mrs. Dale's eyes.

The large staircase leading up from the hall to the second storey divided the bedroom corridor; on the one hand were the family sleeping rooms, on the other the guest chambers. The door of Mrs. Dale's room almost

faced the stairs, her son's was at the very end of the corridor, while Margaret's was at the opposite extremity. But we all know there is an affinity between young people that draws them together, "though waves divide" and friends do chide; therefore it was not extraordinary that as Margaret came out of her room dressed for dinner, John also issued from his, also "got up regardless," for the same occasion. Considering, however, that Mr. John had been listening and watching in the dark for the last half-hour, waiting to hear the first rustle of Diana's garments, so as to waylay her, and exchange one kindly word and look in the friendly solitude before they joined the family party, it was not so very extraordinary. Margaret came blushingly towards her lover; that last look in the glass told her she looked uncommonly well. Shining holly was in her hair, and on her rounded cheeks and glowing lips were roses and pomegranates, such as even Flora could not rival.

The grace of her half-averted head as he joined her, and the shy tenderness of her eyes were irresistible. The corridor was very dimly lighted; the doors round it were all seemingly tightly shut. The servants were busy downstairs. John's arm stole round Diana's shrinking form; and the first kiss of love fell on the fair huntress's lips. But Mrs. Dale's door was not shut, and Mrs. Dale herself witnessed,—with what surprise may be imagined,—this little scene.

The surprise indeed prevented her coming forward, and sent her to the nearest chair, literally to recover her breath before she decided what was to follow. She could do nothing then. The guests were arriving, her husband was already downstairs. She must go too,—must face those daring young people; receive their deceitful courtesies, and appear happy and at ease, while her heart was beating fast with anger and amazement.

John went to bed that night, determining

he would put an end to Margaret's scruples next day, as soon as she had gone home, by announcing his intentions to his father. There would be a row, no doubt; but, in this nineteenth century, "cruel parients" are only to be met with on the stage. He was heir apparent—the only child, too. Disagreeables there might be; but uncombatable opposition to last any time,—certainly not!

And Diana? She went to sleep happy, though it was really too bad of Johnny to have taken such a liberty. However, it should never happen again,—not until all was arranged with the consent of every one too,—then of course it would be different; but she blamed herself too for condescending to come to his father's house on false premises,—this should really be the last time; and so both of them soothed themselves off into blissful slumbers.

But it was long before the father and mother slept. Mrs. Dale told what she had seen, and also what she thought; and as she

told it, her case seemed weak and inconsequential.

"Kissed her, did he?" cried the squire; "small blame to him, that's all. I dare say she's not the first pretty girl he's kissed. I once caught him kissing the barmaid at Clack."

"Oh, how wrong!" cried Mrs. Dale. "But don't you see, Margaret Shrugg is different. I can't exactly explain, but there was something in their manner that convinced me there must be some understanding between them. You know she's not the style of girl to let Johnny, or any man, take a liberty."

"No; she's not," he answered more thoughtfully. "Well, what's to be done; perhaps I'd better warn him off, eh! But then again,—noticing what is most likely merely lad's love, may bring about just what we don't want,—for that matter, though, I'd like the girl for a daughter well enough."

"Ah! that is out of the question. Grace is as good a girl as one can wish; and her money

will be very acceptable if we live long, and they have a large family," Mrs. Dale said.

"But he and Grace don't seem to be in a hurry?"

"That's their way," she said; "but I'm sure the Exelby's are in earnest, and John must know what a bad effect any foolish flirting would have on his future prospects. Do speak to him to-morrow."

Mrs. Dale took Margaret home soon after breakfast next morning, hoping her husband and son would come to a mutual understanding in her absence. She showed no diminution of kindness to her young guest,—in fact, she was rather more kind than usual; for in her partial eyes Johnny was so adorable a hero, no woman could behold him and not straightway love him. And this maternal idea was one of the reasons that induced her to tell that fib about his engagement to Miss Exelby when she first renewed her friendship with Mrs. Francis Shrugg.

John had only one short moment alone with

Diana before she went away; and in it he told her he meant to have it all out with his father immediately, if not sooner.

Diana left with a fluttering heart. Would she ever return to the Hall, or was she leaving Eden for ever?

And Johnny was not very composed, though he whistled loudly, and armed himself with a dog-whip which he cracked continually as he set off on his daily visit to the stables, feigning an ease and indifference by no means felt. His father followed after a time, and putting his arm in John's, they together inspected the horses and hounds; the elder man paying a deference to the opinion of the younger that might have warned the latter something unpleasant was in the background.

If only the son could have nerved himself to get the first word,—

At last the inspection was over, and all the orders given; and then the squire led his son away across the quiet park towards the home

farm. It was a wintry landscape, but by no means a gloomy one; leafless branches stuck out overhead, and last year's nests hung ragged from the bare and creaking boughs, but on a level with the eyes were great glistening bushes of red-berried holly forming an inner avenue to the great bare beech and elm trees; beyond the park the land fell in a long and gentle slope, and in its bottom were clusters of homesteads; here and there a church tower, and many clumps of fine trees; and beyond again, the country rose in russet and purple distance, dotted with villages and mapped with farms, till the highest ridge met the low sky and bounded the scene. The squire had travelled far in his youth; the grand tour of the time had not satisfied him, and he had found out for himself routes of magnificence, and also difficulty and danger that fairly entitled him to call himself a *bonâ fide* traveller; but no beautiful foreign scenery was to him half so beautiful as the narrow homeliness of his own country.

Johnny had not travelled so far: he knew Paris and Belgium, and of course every mountain track about Chamouni; but in these days of overland routes the young man thought scorn of such short journeys, and had often projected starting off for Africa, or America,—Europe being too limited a sphere for his would-be wanderings. With such magnificent notions of space he could not be expected to view Yorkshire in quite so rose-coloured a light as did his father; yet notwithstanding these large aspirations, he did love and admire his native place, and would have unhesitatingly dubbed any dissenter to his opinion a fool.

The squire began, as they turned into the long glade that ended where the stacks of the home farm rose up against the sky.

"That's a nice, lady-like girl,—very!"

"Who?" said John, hypocritically.

"Who? why Francis Shrugg's girl, Diana, to be sure."

John's courage rose, and he would have

said all he wanted to say, had not his father, vexed at the question, gone on too fast for the son to interrupt.

"Who!—why do you profess ignorance, sir? I tell you what it is; I won't have your mother's guests treated like barmaids. Shrugg has been unfortunate, but his daughters are ladies; and, by George, I won't have you trifle either with them or Grace Exelby."

The son's anger rose too at what he considered unjustifiable suspicion.

"I have never trifled with any one," he cried.

"What!" his father exclaimed, withdrawing his arm, and stopping to look at his boy's face. "Didn't you kiss and hug Miss Shrugg last night,—on the stairs, too? Don't you call such conduct trifling, nay, insulting, sir? If—if I'd seen you, I'd have,—have used this about your shoulders!" and he shook his stick.

"Kiss and hug!" John repeated indignantly; "pray who was spying on my actions?"

"No one," cried the squire, loudly. "Your

mother saw it accidentally. 'Can you give your mother the lie, sir?"

"If she saw it," John exclaimed, "she must know there was no 'kissing and hugging!'"

This sounded so like giving his mother the lie, that Mr. Dale became extremely angry; and not waiting to hear further, cried out frantically,—

"Dare you tell me, sir, you never did such a thing?"

"I gave her one kiss," John replied; "that isn't kissing and hugging, I should think?"

Mr. Dale struck his stick impatiently down on to the ground, and turned to continue his walk.

"Oh, one kiss," he repeated more mildly. "Well, we'll admit it in that form, as you are particular; but do you consider it was a gentlemanly thing to do?"

Then John said what he should have said long ago,—

"Yes, father; I suppose you kissed my

mother before she became your wife; and I hope Margaret Shrugg will be my wife some day."

Again the squire stood still, and stared at his son.

"What!" he cried, not angrily, but as if he could not take in the meaning; "your wife!"

"Yes," John went on eagerly; "I meant to tell you before, but there have been so many people about. But I made up my mind to tell you to-day, for she,—Margaret,—is very unhappy there should be any apparent secrecy."

"It is very kind of you thinking it necessary to consult me at all," said Mr. Dale, in a tone John had never heard him use before; "I suppose, but for this accidental discovery, I should have continued in ignorance to the end of the chapter. And pray who is to console Miss Exelby?"

"Miss Exelby was never anything to me!"

"No!" his father cried; "it strikes me her

family would tell a different story. But I tell you what," and here his tone changed and became natural again, "you must get rid of this boyish fancy, for we can never consent to your marriage with Margaret Shrugg."

"Why not?"

"John, give over all this folly," cried his father. "Why not, indeed! If you were so sure of our consent, why have you gone on so slyly all this time, instead of speaking up like a man. Is it a usual thing for men of property to marry their tradesmen's daughters? Nay," he added, as John would have broken in angrily, "in the eyes of the world she is my tradesman's daughter."

"The position is my look out," said John; "no one would consider the Shruggs were tradespeople. You yourself have always declared her to be perfection!"

"So I have, and so she is,—nearly;" said the father, bitterly thinking of the deception he had met with in return for all his kindness,—

still blaming his son the most. "But, besides her father's position, she is not a suitable wife for you, for she is penniless."

"I shouldn't think *I* need marry for money."

"Not entirely; but you must remember that during my lifetime you only have a small portion. Besides this, I won't have Grace Exelby unfairly treated: your mother,—everybody,—considers it a settled thing. If you are in a hurry to marry, I'll see what I can add to your allowance,—that is, if you marry properly."

"I can't help what people choose to believe," cried John. "Look here, father: I'm not a lad,—this is no lad's fancy. You know I have never wilfully vexed you,—I hope I never shall; but I shall stand by Margaret."

"Go home," said the squire; "go home. I can't think and determine in a moment; all this is new to me, remember. I must have time: go home." Then he strode away in the direction of the farm, and John thought it best to let him alone for the present.

"It isn't so much his taking a liking for the girl," Mr. Dale said afterwards to his wife, when he had related what had passed between him and Johnny, "but it is his deceit. I never thought he was like that. And then how he prevaricated, and pretended he had meant to tell me all along. 'I thought him as honest as the day,' but it's always the case when a woman's in the way,—always. Now, what is to be done?"

Mrs. Dale wisely let pass unnoticed the slur on her sex,—she said her husband was better for throwing a stone at some one; but she took her boy's side. "I don't suppose he meant to hide it from us," she said. "I loved and admired Margaret, but she is London bred, remember; she knows the value of position. I always suspect these high and mighty beauties; she has ensnared the poor boy, depend upon it."

"Perhaps she has," he replied, despondingly; "but, for all that, there he is,—ensnared. Now what's to be done?"

"It must be stopped somehow. Shall I speak to him?"

"I wish you would. I fired up; I couldn't help it, when he tried to blind me so meanly. I know I ought to have kept cool, but I can't stand being fooled; I thought him so honest."

John moved about, miserable. That his father should accuse him of wilful deception galled him deeply; and that his mother should have witnessed a scene which was sacred in the young lover's opinion, and made vulgar comments upon "kissing and hugging," annoyed him greatly. "Tradesmen's daughters!" thought he; "I wonder if all our ancestors could be routed out, would they all bear spotless reputations? I suppose they were not all belted knights and idle ladies. One would think I was degrading myself. There is Robin Shrugg, welcomed and feasted because his father ousted his cousin out of the property; and that cousin's daughter looked down upon because her father condescends to be honest. I

hate such ideas,—such rotten conservatism,—such snobbish servility;" and then he thought unkindly of his kind old father, forgetting how strong a case his father had against him. He was in this mood when his mother caught him.

"Your father has been telling me,"—she began.

"Yes, mother," John interrupted: "I know all that, of course. You chose to misconstrue what you saw last night; and now my father won't listen to reason, and actually says I have deceived him."

"Your father has been telling me," Mrs. Dale repeated, as calmly as if there had been no interruption, "you did not mean to insult Miss Shrugg; I am very thankful you repudiate that notion. I own I was very much distressed to suppose you capable of such ungentlemanly behaviour. But he also says you wish to marry her, and I confess I hardly believe he understood you rightly. It is very

certain you can't have two wives, in this country at least; and you have always led another young lady to suppose you meant her to be your wife."

Her manner was so composed, that Johnny was rather overawed by it. He could not answer her with warmth as he had answered his father, for she gave him no excuse. She had not declaimed against his lady love, but merely expressed what she appeared to feel, —natural and justifiable astonishment.

"I have never said anything to lead Grace Exelby to suppose so," he said, quietly.

"Nay," his mother answered; "how can I tell what you have said. In love affairs, bystanders can judge only by looks and particular inferences. I think, though, if your memory is faithful, it can tax you with particular speeches and attentions that can have but one inference."

"Of course we have flirted,—we liked each other as old playfellows; but I'll be hanged,—

beg your pardon, mother,—I'm quite sure no word of mine to her compromised my liberty."

Mrs. Dale did not wish to tell a fib; she would use all means in her power, to stop her boy's infatuation, but she was not prepared to use dishonourable means. She had hoped he had, like most young men, made some foolish love speeches, that might on occasion prick his conscience; but she was well aware also that any idea of marriage between them had birth entirely in her own brain. Nevertheless, she tried to impress him with it again.

"My dear boy," she said, persuasively, "I will just show you how the matter really stands. I can quite understand how your generous nature is attracted by Miss Shrugg's misfortunes, as well as by her good looks; but you must try and look at the bare facts fairly also. Granted, no binding engagement existed between Grace and you, yet you know you have singled her out at all the parties, and been seen so constantly with her, that every

one, including herself, poor girl! naturally supposed your attentions would result, as such close attentions usually result, in marriage. Now, you know, other young men have been kept away from Grace entirely through you; and even if you can persuade the public your affections were merely Platonic, there will always remain the conviction that you sought and won her love, and poor Grace may be slighted as a rejected woman."

But this was going too far; and Johnny turned round upon his mother with a laugh he could not hide.

"Now, mother!" he exclaimed, "come, come; you forget I'm your son, and so can't be such an ass as to take all that in."

Notwithstanding all her vexation, she could not avoid smiling.

"Ah! Johnny, boy," she said; "you, with all your wit and talent, to be so soft upon a girl like Margaret."

"There you are wrong, mother. She has

wit and talent; I have nothing but a name and a position I had no concern in getting."

"But you are only just ready to work for yourself; and with a well connected wife, love, you would be able to make for yourself a name and position far above your father's."

"My father married the woman he loved; and I couldn't be happier than he is. Position be hanged!"

"Have you no ambition?"

"Yes; and so has Margaret. She would stir me up, and help me on. She—"

"No, no. You would wish to be independent of your father, because in marrying her, you would marry without his consent; and when you tried for this and that place, it would be said,—'Oh, young Dale wants so and so; something odd about him, isn't there?' And the answer would be, 'He married some shop girl, and his family have cut him.' And the reply to that, I'm certain, would be, 'Serve him right.' Mind, I'm saying what my ex-

perience tells me would be the opinion of nine people out of ten; they hear a rumour, and can't take the time or trouble to sift it; and so falsehoods take the place of facts. It is so; it is, indeed."

"Mother, I did not know you were so worldly-minded!"

"Did it ever strike you, John, that Miss Shrugg may be worldly-minded in encouraging your folly?"

"No, indeed; I'm sure she's not."

"Do you remember, pray, how seemingly guileless and childish Mrs. Seton is? Yet she deliberately sold herself, and her family encouraged her. Oh, you foolish boy, to be so wilfully blind!"

That argument was a hard one, but though he felt it so, his belief in Margaret was not one inch shaken thereby.

"I can't tell what to make of it," Mrs. Dale said to her husband after this bootless talk with her son; "but I can see opposition will only strengthen his infatuation."

So the three met at dinner with reserve and straitened appetites, and for the first time in his life the son avoided meeting his father's eyes. Next day and the next brought no further confidence, and neither side would break the unnatural barrier that had arisen between them. But if the son was obstinate, so was the mother; and a determined woman is always more than a match for a determined man.

Margaret guessed the worst, as day after day passed and her lover came not. How could he seek her when he could only say she was not considered good enough to be his wife. With all her love she would not brook to hear that, whatever she might think. So while he moved uneasily about at Dale, she, avoiding the road that led there, walked perseveringly in the opposite direction, saying to herself, she could wait patiently any time for things to come straight; but each afternoon, as she returned home with muddy boots and chilled frame, she felt as if suspense was beyond her endurance. They met one day, accidentally; Johnny had

been carried off, following the hounds to the other side of Shrugg Park; and as he came home, his horse's drooping head and slow pace showed the rider's mood to be heavy and dejected. Margaret had been to see Mrs. Robert Shrugg, and the visit to the blind, discontented woman, had depressed her.

The wintry wind swept up the lonely road, and brought dead leaves over the Park wall to strew in Margaret's path. They made her moralize. Were they not emblems of the hopes that had died since last summer? A few months had dashed Susan's glowing expectations that had seemed so solid, and left not one earthly hope to her; friends and position had slipt away from all but Linda; and Margaret wondered why so much luxury had been heaped upon the one who least cared for it. For herself, she had come into Yorkshire, free of heart and proud in her independent spirit; and now she had lowered her colours unreservedly,—weak to resist the first sweet words of a comparatively new acquaintance.

But as she raised her eyes and saw who was coming, dejection and melancholy retrospection immediately gave place to delight. He was near,—that was the only idea her mind could grasp now; the fluttering yellow leaves, the cold bleak wind,—what did they become? —golden drops, balmy breezes. She saw him, and her step became buoyant, her spirit light and sanguine; yet the first look at her lover might have shown her what need there was for disquietude. John watched her approach, noted the grace of her carriage, the brilliancy of her changing complexion, the shy eloquence of her kindling eyes, and wondered how he was to tell her the truth. Should it be the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

He sprang from the saddle, and passing his arm through the bridle, clasped her hand in his as if he meant to keep it altogether. Then in the happiness of the moment the whole truth seemed bearable, and he let it all out. But, alas! though her heart was very loving, her

pride was very great, and it was sorely wounded by this disclosure.

"It is what I expected," she said. "We were mad to think otherwise. I dare say I should behave as your father and mother do under the same circumstances. Perhaps some day we shall be glad they have so decided."

"Decided!" cried he, the whole matter becoming suddenly simple under the influence of her presence. "It only decides me to act as a man. *I* am not a bit afraid of not making my way, if only you will stand by me,—there are lots of ways open. I can do anything,—our tastes are not extravagant. What is enough for one is enough for two. Margaret, dearest, listen; let us marry, and go to London. I see exactly what to do. My father likes you awfully, you know, and when he sees we're in earnest, he'll give in; if not, why I can be a clerk,—anything,—no fear of our not getting on."

Margaret coloured up. Only fancy a little house all to themselves, with no one to interfere

between them! was it not almost a brighter prospect than being the petted wife of the heir-apparent, with constant surveillance from head-quarters? But she was a practical woman, and the momentary vision would not bear inspection.

"But if you didn't get anything," she asked, "what should we do? And if they wouldn't forgive us! Besides,—I don't like having to be forgiven."

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "for a long time I could manage without work or keep; my horses and my rifles and lots of things would sell well: the furniture of my rooms is my own too. I paid all my bills at Christmas,—at least, my father did; we could start clear. O Margaret, why should we go on wasting our lives? we could be so jolly together! Do you know I have ever so long sickened of this missish life, —it's neither manly, nor good for one. Why should I be content with dogs and horses, and the same stupid round of monotonous amusements, when men younger than I am are

winning names for themselves, and leaving their mark for future ages to applaud? Why should I, merely because my father can leave me enough to live on as he has lived, waste all my energies over what any farm-bailiff can do as well, if not better. I am sick of it all,—I am indeed. And do you not suppose I,—like the men in the parable,—have talents given to my charge? What am I doing with them now?"

The bitterness of his tone roused her.

"I think of that parable often, too," she said. "I think perhaps I ought to go out into the world and help to lift the burden off poor papa; it is an awful parable to think over. But then again, in your case wouldn't it be like taking your fate into your own hands? Couldn't you show as much zeal and talent here at home in small matters, as out in the world in great things that only occasionally occur?"

"No," he said impetuously; "I'm not wanted here,—my father and mother have everything in thorough order. I shouldn't be missed. Go with me,—you shall work too; you

shall teach music, if I can't get on just at first. We are not meant to sit fretting idly at home. You have promised yourself to me; let us work honestly together, love. What would luxury be to either of us, at the sacrifice of each other? What will our lives be worth, separated?"

It was the old question many thousands have asked themselves when love and expediency have been in opposition. Who can answer it? Who can say whether lives might not have been better and purer, dared they to have taken their own way? Who has clearness of vision enough to see just when the tide may be taken safely by a bold swimmer? Cold duty, or colder conventionality, warns us back, and our only comfort perhaps is that we have just strength enough left to obey. To ourselves, life seems shadowed and blighted for ever, and the wound never heals; but by-and-by, when the veil is lifted, shall we not be content? That "Need it have been so?" that so often perplexes the retrospection of quiet age is never answered aright in this world.

Margaret was sorely tempted, and as long as his voice was heard, her inclinations went with him; he forced a half assent from her, before they parted, to marry him, if he could prevail on her father to consent; and he was to speak to Mr. Shrugg next day.

"And if your father refuses," John asked, "will you throw me over?"

She looked into his honest eyes. Throw him over,—could she commit suicide?

The melancholy oil lamps were already alight in the dim bow windows, where the blue and red botttles and leech jars symbolised Mr. Shrugg's profession, as Margaret reached home; but the brilliant light of renewed love burned strong within her, and she saw no gloom as she ran lightly into the house.

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